

And All The Days Were Special by Constantius

Series: [Special \[3\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: D'Artagnan "Dart" (Stranger Things), Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Grigori (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Sam Owens (Stranger Things), Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane & Dustin Henderson & Maxine Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

The third book in the Special series!

Mike and El have been apart for two years but are still desperately in love. When Dr. Owens discovers the Mind Flayer has a sinister new plot to invade our world, he reunites our young heroes to save the day one more time. In a globetrotting adventure stretching from the deserts of New Mexico to the lochs of Scotland, it is up to the Party and some unexpected allies to foil the plans of the Upside Down... and just maybe stop the Mind Flayer once and for all.

All the while, in the midst of saving the world, Mike and El struggle with young love and all the joys and problems it can bring.

This tale will have all the action, adventure, romance, comedy, thrills

and chills you've come to expect from the Special series. There will be angst, lots of fluff, and a bit of smut. There will be Dustin & Steve, Lucas & Max, Dart the demodog, and a host of other favorites. And of course there will be plenty of Mileven...

1. The Prince

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello everyone and welcome to the third and (probably) final book in the Special series.

If you're a returning reader, welcome back, and let me just say that I am thrilled you've decided to come along for another journey. If you're a new reader, I hope you enjoy this tale of Mileven and their friends.

For those who are new, this is a self-contained story, but it does follow along from the events in the first two books of the series. You shouldn't have to read those books to enjoy this tale - I'll try to explain some of the more confusing developments in the text and hopefully it will be pretty easy to pick up what is going on. Obviously I encourage you to read the previous stories, if only because I love it when people read my stuff! It may help you to understand certain parts better (why is Dart the demodog hanging out with the good guys? How did Steve end up working for the government on a squad of professional monster hunters?) but it shouldn't be necessary.

Two quick warnings. There will be a bit of smut in this tale. Mike and El are eighteen, they're deeply in love, and they're filled with hormones, so one element of this book will be a first-time story. With that said, the other warning: smut isn't really the point of this book, it won't be a huge element, and it will be relatively tame, just like in the previous story, *When He Was Special*. I tend to use smut as a way to deepen the emotional connection of the characters and for *cough* comedy, so if you're looking for straight up porn, this might not be the place. Not judging, by the way! Just want to set expectations.

With the preliminaries taken care of, I won't bother

you any further. Let's draw back the curtain on the third book of the Special series: And All The Days Were Special.

The VLA Observatory

San Agustin Plains, New Mexico

Saturday, April 23, 1988

Eleven watched the stars.

The great parabolic arc of the radio telescope was her bed and she lay quiet on it with her backpack for a pillow. The blanket underneath her softened the cold steel of the dish. She watched the constellations glowing in the night sky and she told herself those same stars were shining down on Mike.

She could recognize the stars now and the constellations. There was Orion the Hunter, with the three stars of his belt, and bright Rigel and Betelgeuse sketching out his body. There was the Big Dipper, the constellation that was also part of Ursa Major, the Great Bear. El knew how to follow the handle of the dipper to Polaris, the pole star, the one star in the night sky that didn't move. All the other stars spun around it.

She saw Cassiopeia and Perseus and Andromeda. She saw Taurus the Bull and the red star Aldebaran that made his bloodshot eye. She knew that the bull's face was formed by a star cluster called the Hyades.

If Mike was here, she would tell him all of these things. She would tell him about the night sky.

Oh, he probably knew already. Mike was so smart and he knew pretty much everything. But she knew if he was here, he would listen, the hint of a smile playing on his too wide mouth and his wonderful soft lips. He would let her tell him about the sky and he would be happy to hear the things she'd learned. He would play along, and point at another light, and ask her, "What's that one?" And even though he already knew, El would tell him it was Venus, and it

wasn't a star but a planet, and Mike would nod thoughtfully and lie back on the dish beside her.

"Tell me more, El," he would say.

And she would, and Mike would listen, and they would be together under the night sky and the endless stars and everything would be good.

But Mike wasn't here.

The New Mexico desert spread out below her all the way to the horizon. In the midst of the brush and the scrub and the desert flowers, the radio telescopes reached toward the sky like neolithic monuments. There were more than twenty, spread across the desert in a giant 'Y' three miles long. Each was ten times the height of a man, steel titans looking deep into the darkness of space.

The telescopes were El's refuge. When the strain of the Project was too great, when the loneliness was too much for Will or Ewan or Steve to fill, she would run across the plains, backpack bouncing on her narrow shoulders. She would climb one of the towers to the shelter of the dish and she would watch the stars and think of Mike.

She adjusted her headphones, settling them better over her short hair, and then she pushed play on her Walkman. She stared into the pearly glow of the Milky Way as lonely piano keys sounded the first notes of *Right Here Waiting For You*.

*Oceans apart day after day
And I slowly go insane.
I hear your voice on the line
But it doesn't stop the pain.*

*If I see you next to never,
How can we say forever?*

*Wherever you go,
Whatever you do,
I will be right here waiting for you.
Whatever it takes,*

*Or how my heart breaks,
I will be right here waiting for you.*

El felt the tears welling up in her eyes, blurring the stars. Richard Marx always brought her emotions to the surface, the man's soulful voice uncovering her every doubt and fear. As the tears broke and trickled down her cheeks, she knew this was going to be a bad one. These sad songs tore at her heart, but she missed Mike so much and crying helped the pain.

El hadn't seen or heard from him in ten months. Their last day was burned in her memory, that final moment in Hawkins in June of the year before. They'd been apart for so long before then and she'd looked forward to three whole weeks with him. Her mother had promised, and she and Will had come to the Wheeler house with suitcases bulging with clothes.

But when she arrived there was the phone call. It was Dr. Owens. She was needed and he'd sent a car.

She was with Mike for one day. *One day.*

"Why do you have to go?" he'd asked, sorrow etched across the fine sharp angles of his face. He tried to hide it, knowing it wasn't her fault, but he couldn't put a mask over his sadness.

"I can't tell you," she sobbed. "I promised Dr. Owens and Steve I wouldn't tell anybody. And Mike, I don't care about Dr. Owens, but Steve is my friend and I can't break my promise."

The lanky boy nodded sadly, accepting it the way he accepted everything about her, and it made her cry even harder. El wrapped her arms around him, trying to crush his slender form against her, to mold them together until they were one. Her fingers tangled in his thick hair and she pulled him down to her so her lips could find his.

Then there was the taste of Mike mixed with her saltwater tears, and she tried to put every ounce of her love into the kiss, but she knew she couldn't. She had so much love for this boy that a million kisses couldn't hold it all, but God she tried anyway.

After ten months, she still remembered that kiss. It was all she had left of him.

When they broke the kiss, her tears were so heavy she could barely see. Her brother Will had to help her into the car and then he climbed into the back seat beside her and the car pulled away. They left Mike behind, looking lost and forlorn on the driveway.

It seemed she was always leaving Mike behind.

Now every night El sat under the stars, listening to lonely songs about love far away. She had a whole playlist. *Faithfully, Missing You, Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone*. Heaven forbid, sometimes she would get so depressed that she would put on *Just When I Needed You Most* by Randy VanWarmer. That was only for the worst nights, when she needed to release all the pain, and it always left her a sniveling wreck.

Now, after Journey and John Waite and Bill Withers had rebroken her heart, El turned off the tape and wiped her eyes. It was getting late, close to midnight. She needed to go in.

She packed the Walkman, headphones and blanket into her backpack, then eased through the hatch in the dish. She carefully climbed the steel rungs of the telescope tower down to the desert floor. For a moment she looked across the darkened plain, shivering in the cold night air, and then her gaze turned again to the skies.

Please keep him safe, El told the stars. *Wherever he is, keep Mike safe. And if there is any way you could tell him I love him, I wish that you would.*

* * *

El quietly closed the door to the main observatory building. She wasn't trying to sneak — she was allowed to go outside whenever she wanted — but it was late, people were sleeping, and the front doors would boom if you weren't careful. She walked past the empty

greeter's desk and the little museum for the public, then turned toward the dormitory wing.

She hesitated.

She wanted to talk. She missed Mike terribly, and she felt so utterly lonely, and she wanted to hear the voice of another human being.

Will would already be asleep. So would Ewan. Steve was often up at this hour, but she knew Remo and Dr. Owens had sent him away on a mission the day before.

Sully? El liked the blonde soldier. She was friendly and loud. She was like El's friend Max, if Max was all grown up and obsessed with guns. Sully had a... rambunctious... relationship with Steve and she was always nice to El, but the woman was a little too high decibel for the mood that El was feeling now.

Dr. Owens and Remo would still be working, probably eager to finish up for the night and get to bed. They were kind, of course, and they would talk to El if that's what she wanted, but she felt like it would be an imposition.

Grigori? Eww. El loathed the man, not least because he'd tried to kill her father.

She realized she was stalling. She knew who she wanted to talk to.

El turned away from the dormitory and went back across the entrance hall. She swiped her badge at a heavy steel door and stepped into the restricted wing. Members of the public were never allowed in this part of the building. Even visiting scientists were denied access unless they were members of the Project.

She paused inside the door, wondering if this was a good idea. Part of her wanted nothing more than to turn and run from this place like she was fleeing a lion's den. She pushed the feeling down and forced herself to walk forward.

The restricted wing had the same bland institutional feel as the rest of the building. There were linoleum floors, drop ceilings, walls painted government issue grey. The offices were empty at this hour,

their doors locked. El padded down the dimly lit hallway, her sneakers squeaking on the beige tile.

At the end of the hall, she turned down a side corridor and walked until she reached the prison bars.

Beyond the bars was an office suite. El could see a desk, a computer, bookshelves and a coffee table. There was a couch and visitor chairs. A man was seated at the desk, reading. He was tall and slender and he had thick white hair. He looked up from his book and smiled when he saw her.

"Eleven," the man said. His voice was soft, calm, the way she always remembered it. She couldn't ever recall him raising his voice.

"You should call me El," she told him.

The man shook his head. "Your name is Eleven. You shouldn't be ashamed of it."

She shrugged. "I'm not. It's just not who I am anymore."

"You'll always be Eleven to me."

She was quiet then and so was he. El was conscious of him watching her. She couldn't read his face. She never could. She could never tell what he was thinking, if he was judging her, if he was disappointed with her.

"What are you reading?" she asked at last.

He closed his book, showed her the cover. "It's called *The Prince*. It's by a man named Niccolo Machiavelli."

"What's it about?"

"It's about... strength. It's about having the wisdom to do what's right, even when people will judge you harshly for it."

Her brow wrinkled. "I don't understand."

"This man Machiavelli was an advisor to powerful lords, Eleven, in a

place called Florence, many years ago. He wrote this book about the things that a prince — a ruler — should do if he wanted to protect his people and his city and his country. Machiavelli said that if a ruler ignores the way the world is because he wishes it was something else, he will bring about his own ruin."

"Oh," El said, confused. There was something about his words that bothered her, but she couldn't say what it was.

"Machiavelli is misunderstood," the white haired man continued in his soft, pleasant voice. "People dismiss the things he wrote, but only because they never thought them through."

They were quiet again, looking at each other. El couldn't hold the man's gaze, those eyes like mirrors that never told her anything.

"Can I get you anything?" she finally said. "Some tea?"

"No," he smiled. "But thank you, child, for asking."

Silence again. Emotions churned inside El, contradictory and battling. She felt so little again, the helpless girl doing the tests. Everything about this man confused her.

"What did you do with the picture?" she blurted.

He frowned, ever so slightly. "Which picture, Eleven?"

"You and me. My lion. I drew it for you. I kept it in my room. The room at... the Lab."

He nodded. "I remember. I remember when you showed it to me."

"I wanted you to like it."

"I did, Eleven."

"Did you?" Her words came out harsh, an accusation.

"I did."

He turned to his desk and reached into a stack of papers, pulling out

a manila envelope. He opened the envelope and took out an old, wrinkled sheet of notebook paper. The white-haired man came to the bars, holding the paper out to her. El took it, her hand trembling.

It was a child's scribble. There was a crude table, a scrawl on it that might have been a cat or a tiny stuffed lion. There was a little stick figure marked *11* and a larger stick figure too.

"I kept it," the man said.

For a moment she couldn't speak. Her mouth worked soundlessly, trying to find words. Finally, she whispered, "Why?"

"It reminded me of you. I was always very proud of you, Eleven."

El stared at the picture, emotion bubbling up so strongly that she couldn't breathe. She remembered that spartan little room, the stuffed lion, the picture taped to the wall over her little cot.

She remembered how much she wanted to please this man, how much she loved him, how much she wanted more than anything for him to love her back. She wanted him to take her hand and walk with her in the sunlight, like she was his daughter and he was her fa

No.

El pushed the paper back through the bars, holding it out to him. She tried to make her eyes cold, tried to wipe the emotion from her face, tried to close herself off the way he did so easily.

"I don't want it," she said.

"I kept it for you, Eleven," he told her.

"I don't want it," she repeated. She could feel the tears welling up and desperately fought them down. She had to keep up her mask.

The white haired man watched her calmly. He didn't take the paper.

"Good night, Papa," she said, dropping the picture into his cell. She turned and walked away, cold and deliberate.

Don't cry don't cry don't cry don't cry.

"Good night, Eleven," Papa said and his voice was gentle.

She stifled a sob and started to walk faster. She turned the corner into the main hall and broke into a run.

Somehow she held back the tears until she got to her room. She closed her door and fell to her knees and the dam burst, painful choking gasps wracking her body endlessly. She was so alone. Mike wasn't here and Hopper wasn't here and Joyce wasn't here and it felt like Papa was the only thing tethering her to the world.

* * *

Indiana University - Ballantine Hall

Bloomington, Indiana

Saturday, April 23, 1988

"Do you see anyone?" Mike asked.

"No," said Lucas. The dark-skinned boy shined his flashlight beam through the window. It picked out row after row of computer monitors and a big mainframe at the far end of the darkened room. There were posters on the walls trumpeting the merits of IBM personal computers, Bill Gates and Microsoft, Steve Jobs and the NeXT Cube. Above the door was a red and white banner reading *Go Hoosiers!*

The room was empty and quiet. So was the street. The only sound was the wind in the trees and the chirp of the crickets in the darkness.

"You don't see anyone because it's Saturday night," Max hissed. "And only total dorks would be hanging out at a computer lab!" The red-haired girl's eyes flicked over the three boys crouched in the bushes beside her. "Oh, wait a minute... that would be us."

"Technically it's almost Sunday morning," Dustin said, checking his watch. "And we're not dorks, Max, we're spies."

Max pinched the bridge of her nose. "I can't believe I agreed to help with this. Again."

"Okay, the coast is clear," Lucas declared. He could tell Max was getting ready for a proper bitch session, and he wanted to cut it short before she built a head of steam. "You're up, Max."

"All right," his girlfriend sighed. "Give me some light here, stalker."

Lucas trained his flashlight on the window, an old single-pane construction locked with a simple latch. Ballantine Hall had been built back in the 1950s, when security was an afterthought at best. Max slid a steel ruler between the upper and lower sash and snapped the latch open with a deft flick of her wrist.

Next to Lucas, Mike sighed.

Oh God, Lucas thought, please don't let him start...

"El used to do that," Mike said, looking forlornly at the window latch. There was a mooney whine in his voice that made Lucas grind his teeth.

"Do you remember?" Mike continued. "Do you remember that night we snuck into Whateley House—"

"Oh my god, Wheeler!" Max hissed. "Would you shut the fuck up? I swear, I've lost track of the number of times we've broken into this computer lab—"

"Eight," said Dustin.

"—and every single time you start up with El and Whateley House! You miss her, we get it! But I swear I will strangle you if you bring it up again!"

Mike's eyes widened in shock. He looked from Max to Dustin to Lucas. "Do I really say it every time?"

Lucas cleared his throat awkwardly. "Sorry, dude — Max is right. She *probably* could have found a better way to express herself, but she's right." He gave his girlfriend a meaningful look. She scowled and crossed her arms over her chest, but held her tongue.

Mike spread his hands helplessly. "Geez, I'm sorry guys. I know I sound like a broken record. I just—"

"Miss her so much," Dustin completed for him. The curly-haired boy's tone was soft and it took the sting out of his words. "We get it, Mike. And we're sorry. We miss her too. But maybe we should talk about this when we're not, you know, breaking and entering." He gestured at the open window.

"Right," Mike said, nodding. "Okay. Sorry. Let's get this done."

The four teens crawled through the window into the computer lab. Lucas' flashlight probed the darkness, confirming again that they were alone. They crept toward the mainframe, moving with the certainty of people who had done this before. Despite their practiced steps, they stayed low and listened for the slightest sound.

In moments they reached the main terminal and Lucas slid into the chair. Mike pulled a portable floppy drive from his backpack, plugged it into the mainframe and pushed home a disk. The light on the drive flashed red, then green, and Mike gave a thumbs-up.

Lucas' fingers danced across the terminal keyboard. In moments, Mike's key program opened the gateway and Lucas had all the computing power of Indiana University at his disposal.

It was time to start the hack.

They'd been at this for almost a year. It was last May when Dr. Owens approached them, showing up unannounced one day in the school parking lot. He told them what he needed, when he needed it, and how to get it. He didn't tell them why.

It didn't matter. As Owens laid out his plan, wrote down code words, outlined hacks and listed databases, it became obvious what they were doing.

They were looking for Hopper.

"We want to help, of course," Mike told Owens, speaking for all of them. "But why us?"

The heavyset man smiled. "For one, because you're smart. All of you. I've been following your progress at school. You know technology. With a little bit of coaching, you four could be a top notch SIGINT operation."

"SIGINT?" Max frowned.

"Signals intelligence," Mike said, never taking his eyes from Dr. Owens. "Intercepting enemy communications."

"Hacking their mainframes," Dustin chimed in. "Breaking codes. Decrypting messages."

"Don't forget translation," Dr. Owens said to the curly-haired boy. "You're still learning Russian, right?"

"да, конечно," Dustin told him, showing off.

"I don't get it," said Lucas. "You must already have people who can do this. You don't need us."

"Oh, but I do. This matter is a bit... sensitive... in Washington. I need plausible deniability. If anything goes wrong, no one's going to look twice at some high school students doing a hack. It's just kids playing around, like in... what's that movie? *WarGames*?"

"Didn't the 'kids' in that movie almost start a nuclear war?" Max snapped.

Owens' smile didn't fade. "And in addition to plausible deniability, you four have an... awareness... of the situation that very few people do. I mean, who else would I turn to? It's not like I can bring this to Remo and his squad. They're very capable people, but they solve problems with bullets, not modems."

The four teens regarded each other. They didn't need to speak; they'd been through so much together that a look was enough.

"Okay," Mike told Dr. Owens. "We're in."

Almost a year later, here they were, doing their eighth break-in and remote hack of Soviet defense mainframes. They'd gotten it down to a science. Max got them access. Lucas ran the hack. Mike handled decryption and Dustin did translation.

The rules were simple: you got what you could in twenty-two minutes and then you bailed. No exceptions. After twenty-two minutes, the chance that countermeasures and reverse traces would find you went up exponentially. It was so tempting to go one more minute, download one more piece of data, especially knowing what was at stake, but Dr. Owens had been firm. Not a second over twenty-two minutes.

So it was a surprise when Max gave the abort sign only thirteen minutes in.

"What's going on?" Lucas asked, wondering if it was a mistake.

"We've got to go," his girlfriend answered, staring out the window at the parking lot. "Someone's watching us from that black jeep."

"Are you sure?" Mike asked.

"Shit!" Max hissed. "He's getting out! He's coming this way!"

That set off a panicked scramble. Mike grabbed the portable drive and decryption disks and stuffed them into his backpack, holding it open so Dustin could add the translation pads. Lucas logged off from the mainframe and quickly wiped the keyboard for fingerprints.

"Come on, hurry!" said Max.

"We've got everything!" Mike called, slinging the backpack over his bony shoulders. "Let's go!"

"He's coming toward the window," Dustin gasped. "Quick, out the door and into the hall!"

In moments they all piled into the hallway, even as the figure outside broke into a run. Lucas looked about wildly; they'd only ever gone

through the window and this was uncharted territory. The hall ran in both directions, with nothing to tell them which way to go.

"This way!" Mike said, pointing. He sprinted away and the other three followed at his heels.

"Do you know where you're going?" Max demanded.

"No!" the lanky boy said. "But anything is better than just standing there!"

There was no sound then but their pants and gasps as they followed the hall's winding course. They threw worried glances over their shoulders as they rushed past empty classrooms. Now and then they'd try a door, but every one was locked.

Suddenly Mike pointed again. "There! A door to the outside! It's open!"

The skinny teen rushed down the hall toward it, even as Lucas' mind screamed a warning.

"Mike!" he shouted. "Wait! Why would the door be open—"

It was too late. A figure dressed all in black, face hidden by a black hood, stepped from a side corridor and grabbed Mike as he raced past. In one smooth motion, the figure twisted Mike's arm behind his back and pushed him face first into the wall.

"Let go of me, you piece of shit!" Mike howled. Despite his height and the surprising strength in his slender arms, he couldn't wrestle free.

"You better do what he says," Lucas growled, moving toward the figure in a fighting crouch. At least he thought it was a fighting crouch. He didn't have any actual combat training, but he'd watched Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* almost a dozen times.

"Lucas, be careful," said Max, her voice tight.

"It's this guy who should be careful," Lucas said. "Because if he doesn't let my friend go, I'm gonna whip his ass."

The figure twisted to look at him. "Sinclair," it said, "are you fucking kidding me?"

Lucas froze. That voice...

The figure pushed the hood back, revealing a handsome face, sparkling grey eyes and absolutely perfect hair.

Lucas sighed. Of course. Who else would it be?

Wherever there was trouble, there was Steve fucking Harrington.

2. The Buddy

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello everyone! As the dark days of the Stranger Things hiatus continue, I thought it would be a good time for a new chapter. Hope you enjoy.

Credit where credit is due, I borrowed (stole) the idea for Steve's custom weapon from the writer ItsThatGuy, whose wonderful story Stranger Trek is posted right here on AO3. A Stranger Things/Star Trek AU, it's well worth a read 😊.

Indiana University - Ballantine Hall

Bloomington, Indiana

Saturday, April 23, 1988

Dustin stared in shock at his best friend. "Steve!"

Steve Harrington, former king of Hawkins High, gave him a nod. "Hey, good to see you, Henderson. Would you tell Kung Fu here to back off? I'm trying to save your asses and you're not making it easy."

Lucas frowned and came out of his fighting stance. Mike stopped struggling in Steve's grip.

"Save our asses?" asked Max. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the demogorgon outside. It seems to think high school computer hackers are on the menu tonight. So I need you little dweebs to shut up, stay close, and do what I say." He released his grip on Mike, apparently deciding that the skinny teen wasn't going to bolt.

"A demogorgon?" Lucas said. "What's it doing here?"

"Let me guess," groaned Dustin. "The Gate's open again."

"Was nobody listening when I said shut up?" Steve asked. "And no, the Gate's not open. Not the one in Hawkins anyway, or the one in Bath. We think there must be a new Gate somewhere and the demogorgon traveled here overland."

"Who's we?" Mike asked suspiciously. He straightened his clothes, trying to recover his dignity after being manhandled so easily.

"My team," said Harrington, pointing to the patch on his left shoulder — a golden eagle with lightning bolts in one claw and an hourglass in the other. "National Security Agency. The Office of Special Situations."

"Dr. Owens," Dustin breathed.

"And Lieutenant Remo," said Lucas.

"You guys were always quick on the uptake," Steve grinned. "That's right. The OSS — saving the world from the forces of darkness since 1982."

Dustin couldn't help being impressed. Harrington had a corporal's stripes and a black commando uniform and a gun at his hip — a heavy, large caliber thing that looked like it could blow holes in a brick wall. But it was more than that. Steve had... attitude. He had a new self-assurance and an easy air of command. There was an aura about him that was very different from the hapless pretty boy Dustin had known before. Combine that with the obvious combat training he'd used to subdue Mike and there was only one possible conclusion.

Steve Harrington had disappeared for two years and come back as Batman.

Lucas cleared his throat. "To repeat my question: *what is the demogorgon doing here?* Is it after us?"

"Well, no," Steve said. "It's after Mike."

There was stunned silence. The Party stared at each other wide-eyed.

Then Mike blurted, "What?"

"Sorry, Wheeler," Steve shrugged. "It's after you."

"Why?" Mike gasped, his voice turning shrill. "What did I do?" The skinny teen looked anxiously from Steve to his friends. His expression screamed, *There must be some kind of mistake.*

"You killed the Fish Flayer two years ago," Dustin offered helpfully.

"It's called a Kraken," Lucas snapped.

Dustin rolled his eyes. "*Whatever.* Mike still killed it. I bet that really made the Upside Down angry."

"You guys were there too!" Mike protested.

"Oh, don't try to pin this on us!" said Max, jabbing a finger at him. "You're the one who hit it with a car."

Steve waved his hands. "Excuse me, children! Can we do this some other time? Big scary monster lurking out there, remember?"

They quieted. "Sorry, Steve," Dustin muttered.

"We need a plan," said Lucas.

They were silent for a moment, thinking.

"So wait a minute," Max said. "It's only after Wheeler, right? That means the rest of us could just—"

Lucas stared at her in disbelief.

"Oh, what?" she said. "We were all thinking it."

"We are *not* leaving Mike to face that thing alone," Dustin said forcefully. "Unless, you know... things get hairy." He patted Mike on the shoulder. "In that case, you're on your own, buddy."

Mike raised his eyes skyward in mute appeal.

"Now listen, you little shits, no one is leaving anyone," Steve said. His easy air of command was fraying rapidly, replaced by exasperation. "You all are going to stick close to me. We are going

to go out that door, cross to the parking lot, get in my jeep, and drive away."

"Just like that?" Max scoffed. "I thought you said the demogorgon's out there! Are we supposed to just *wave* at it on the way to your car? Seriously, if this is what they've been teaching you in ninja school, I'm not impressed."

"It's not—I'm not a ninja," Steve said, sounding rather petulant. "I'm special forces. And we're not going to just wave at it. I've got some tricks up my sleeve."

He reached over his shoulder and pulled a long rod from a sheath on his back. It was made of metal and had a dull, matte black finish, but to Dustin's eyes it bore an uncanny resemblance to a baseball bat. Steve twisted the handle and an array of long, jagged spikes projected from the sides of the weapon.

"Whoa," Lucas and Mike said as one.

"Oh my god," Dustin breathed. "You really are Batman."

"In more ways than one, Henderson," Steve grinned. "In more ways than one."

"*That's* your weapon against the demogorgon?" Max demanded. "A bat?"

"It's a tactical mace," Steve said, irritated. "This is much better than that old Louisville Slugger with the nails in it. I mean, come on, I'm a professional now. I've gotta represent."

Max rolled her eyes and pointed to Steve's holster. "How about you use your gun, dingus?"

"Oh sure," Steve said sarcastically. "I'll start blazing away on a college campus in the middle of the night. This is a stealth operation, Mayfield. The gun is for emergencies only."

Max started to protest again but Steve held up a hand.

"Enough talk," he said. "It's time to go. All of you stay quiet, keep

your eyes open, and follow me."

He reached into a pocket and pulled out a headset. After settling the device over his perfect hair, he tapped the microphone twice.

"Delta Five," he muttered. "I repeat, Delta Five."

"What's Delta Five?" whispered Mike.

"It's code. I've got a buddy waiting for us outside. Delta Five lets him know we're on the way to the jeep. And I thought I told you to be quiet, Wheeler."

They crept down the hallway, Steve moving low and slow, his high-tech bat at the ready. Dustin and his friends followed nervously.

"Ow!" Max hissed as Dustin stepped on her heel.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"Seriously, quiet!" Steve said. "Shit."

They reached the open door and peered outside. Dustin didn't see anything except the quiet street, the trees, and the dim glow of a lonely street lamp. There was no sound but the rustling of the leaves.

"Maybe the demogorgon's gone?" he said hopefully.

"Oh, it's here," Steve murmured. "Count on it."

* * *

The five of them left the building and stole down the sidewalk. Their senses strained for the faintest sound, the slightest hint of movement. There was nothing. After a few minutes, the parking lot came into view and they could see Steve's jeep.

"I think we're going to make it," Lucas whispered.

A low growl sounded from the shadows up ahead.

Max glared at her boyfriend. "I swear to god, why do you always do that? You always have to say something to jinx it!"

An enormous figure materialized out of the darkness. It was a thing out of nightmare, something like a man but distorted and twisted. The arms and legs were somehow too long and they bent at the wrong angles. There were talons, gleaming in the light of the street lamp, and something fluid and slimy on the white-green skin. But the face was the worst.

There wasn't one. There was only an expanse of skin where eyes and nose and mouth should be. It was as if the thing's features had melted and run together like candle wax.

Then the smooth expanse split and the facelessness was gone, replaced by a gaping, screaming, five-jawed mouth lined with row after row of razor teeth.

"Demogorgon," Dustin whispered. Then he found his voice and shouted, "Demogorgon! It's a demogorgon!"

"Get back!" Steve ordered. He stepped toward the creature and tapped his microphone. "Alpha Three. I repeat, Alpha Three."

The demogorgon roared and Dustin couldn't help flinching. His friends were in a panic, shouting and waving their hands wildly.

"Steve!" Max yelled. "Use your gun! I think this is an emergency!"

Steve spun the bat in his hands. "No it isn't. Not for me."

The teenagers went quiet at those words. There was a grim confidence in Harrington's voice that ended all debate.

The demogorgon hesitated as Steve walked forward. It seemed surprised that the puny human was heading for it, looking for a fight. It shifted uncertainly.

Mike coughed. "Should we... should we get some rocks or something? We can't let him fight it alone."

Steve looked back over his shoulder and grinned. "I told you, Wheeler — I'm not alone."

Another growl sounded in the darkness. A form slid from the shadows and into the glow of the street lights. It looked much like the demogorgon, but smaller. Though it walked on all fours, it had the same oddly jointed legs. There were the the same razor claws and gaping, flower-petal mouth.

There were two yellow stripes on its tail.

Dustin's jaw dropped. "Dart," he whispered.

The demogorgon took a step back now, looking between Steve and Dart. Then it spread its arms wide and screamed. Dart reared up on his hind legs and screamed back.

"Get to the jeep," said Steve. "We'll handle this."

Dustin and his friends exchanged glances. Then they started running.

Shouts and snarling sounded in Dustin's ears as he sprinted for the black jeep. He gasped for breath and decided he was definitely going on a diet after this. Given how much time he seemed to spend running for his life, he really needed to get serious about his fitness.

In moments he reached the jeep. It was a four-door model with a closed cab and a small open bed in the back, something like a pick-up truck. He tugged on the front door.

It was locked.

Mike pulled futilely at another door. "Come on you piece of shit!" he shouted.

Lucas and Max weren't having any luck either. All the doors were locked.

"Shit," said Dustin. "Shit, shit, shit." He looked back at Ballantine Hall, where Steve and Dart were locked in mortal combat with the demogorgon. "Steve!" he screamed. "You forgot to give us the keys!"

"A little busy, Henderson!" Steve shouted, ducking a huge taloned fist. "Give me a second!"

Dustin watched the battle, shifting nervously from foot to foot, something he usually only did right before a test or when he really had to pee.

Then he went still, transfixed by what he was seeing.

Steve, quite simply, was *awesome*.

And he and Dart were kicking ass.

The man and the demodog were spinning and leaping, ducking and blocking, sticking and moving. They worked as a team. One went left while the other went right; one went high while the other went low. Dart would make an opening, snapping at the demogorgon's leg; Steve would use the distraction to plant his mace in the thing's chest.

Steve called the shots, shouting "Omega Two!" and "Gamma Four!" and other code words that seemed to tell Dart what to do. Then Steve would join his companion in a vicious kata that left the demogorgon reeling.

Dustin stared at his friend in awe. He'd always looked up to Steve. The older boy was like the big brother he'd never had. But Dustin was pretty sure his friendship had just turned into a full-on man crush.

Lucas cleared his throat. "Steve's, uh, Steve's pretty good at this."

"He sure is," Max murmured, her voice low and appreciative. The girl's hands drifted to her hair, tucking loose strands behind her ear. She straightened her necklace, adjusted her blouse.

Lucas watched her suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

Max realized she was primping and folded her arms across her chest. "Nothing."

Dustin sighed. He had a feeling this moment was going to set the young couple squabbling on the ride back home. He turned his

attention back to the fight, which Steve and Dart seemed to have well in hand.

Then he froze. There was another growl from the shadows.

And another.

Two more demogorgons stepped from the darkness.

* * *

Now it was Steve and Dart's turn to hesitate. Their first foe was on the ropes but the new arrivals changed things. The man and the demodog backed away, watching the newcomers warily.

"Keys!" Dustin called. "Steve, we need the keys!"

Harrington kept backing away. "That... that sounds like a good idea."

One of the new monsters, a towering creature with black stripes on its arms and chest, roared like a lion. Then it started sprinting across the grass.

"Dart!" Steve yelled. "Omega One! Hold them off!" He turned on his heel and raced for the jeep, digging in his pocket as he ran. In a moment he had the keys out, silver and jingling in his hand. The big striped demogorgon followed him, but Dart charged the creature, tackling it with a lunge that tumbled them both to the ground.

Steve pressed desperately on the key fob. The jeep beeped twice and the doors unlocked. Dustin and his friends scrambled inside.

"Come on, Steve!" Lucas yelled. "Let's go, let's go!"

In moments the older boy reached the car and lunged into the driver's seat. He cranked the ignition and the jeep roared to life.

Back on the lawn of Ballantine Hall, Dart was fighting a rear-guard

action against three demogorgons and losing. The demodog was fast, and tough, and putting up a fight his opponents clearly didn't expect, but he was gravely outmatched. One-on-one his chances would have been slim; three-on-one was suicide.

Steve tapped the microphone of his headset. "Omega Five! I repeat, Omega Five!"

Dart ignored the message, or didn't hear it. He twisted and turned, snapping at the demogorgons when they got too close, but his efforts were futile. The monsters were toying with him, like lions stalking prey they'd cut off from the pack.

"Shit," Steve said. "He gets like this sometimes. You have to get his attention." The older boy pulled his gun from its holster. The weapon looked so big, Dustin worried the recoil might break Steve's wrist.

"I thought you said no guns?" Max demanded.

Steve drew a bead on the big monster with the black stripes. "After all that roaring, I think stealth is out the window."

The gun boomed loud enough to make Dustin's ears ring. The big demogorgon sprawled on the ground as a plume of blood sprayed from its shoulder.

Dart's head jerked up in surprise and he looked back at the jeep.

Steve tapped the microphone again. "I said Omega Five, buddy."

Dart gave a last look at the demogorgons. Then he turned and started to run.

The monsters followed. They were fast.

"Come on," Dustin muttered. "Come on, you can make it."

Dart was faster.

The demodog leaped as he neared the jeep, and the car sank down on its axles as all four hundred pounds of him landed in the open bed.

The moment he touched down, Steve slammed down the accelerator. The jeep peeled away in a squeal of tires.

The demogorgons ran behind the vehicle, howling, but falling further and further behind as it picked up speed. Dart reared up on his hind legs, spread his front claws wide, and screamed at the creatures. Steve burst out laughing.

"What is it?" Dustin asked. "Did he say something?"

"Well, I can't understand Dart the way Will can," said Steve. "But I've been his partner long enough to know that roar means *Go fuck yourself*." The older boy frowned thoughtfully. "It's funny, I think that's the only insult he knows."

The demogorgons slowed, realizing the futility of the chase. They turned and vanished into the darkness. Steve kept driving, taking the jeep away from campus and back toward the highway. Dustin and his friends were quiet, gathering their breath and letting their heart rates return to normal.

Then Steve took the exit onto the interstate and Mike stiffened.

"Steve," he said. "That's not the way to Hawkins."

The older boy nodded. "I know, Wheeler. We're not going to Hawkins."

"Why not?" Mike asked warily.

"Because we're catching a plane, Wheeler. We're going to New Mexico."

* * *

Indiana - Interstate 60 Northbound

Saturday, April 23, 1988

Dustin's jaw dropped. "What do you mean we're going to New Mexico?"

"Was I not speaking English?" said Steve. "I mean we're going to New Mexico. Don't worry, you won't need a passport — it's part of the US."

"Really," Max said, her voice dripping with scorn.

"I know," Steve nodded. "I was surprised too."

Mike rubbed his forehead like he was trying to fight off a headache. "Steve, we can't go to New Mexico. What about our parents?"

"That's right!" Dustin said. "My mom thinks I'm sleeping over at Mike's tonight, playing D&D. If I don't come home tomorrow morning, she'll freak!"

"My mom thinks I'm at Mike's too," said Lucas.

"And my mom thinks I'm sleeping over at Dustin's," said Mike.

There was silence. All eyes turned to Max.

She shrugged. "What? My parents don't give a shit where I am."

"Come on guys, what's the big deal?" Steve said. "You're all eighteen, right? I mean, you're adults."

"Try telling that to my mom," Dustin muttered. Mike nodded.

"Steve, we may be eighteen, but we're still in high school," said Lucas. "There's no way we can just pick up and go without telling our parents."

Steve held up a calming hand. "Don't worry about your parents. Agents from the Centers for Disease Control will visit them tomorrow and tell them you've been quarantined. They'll say there was a virus at your school. They had to take you from your... D&D party... and bring you to an isolation facility. Tomorrow afternoon, you guys will call your parents and tell them you're safe and everything's fine, but you might be away for a while."

"Are you fucking serious?" Mike exclaimed, his voice climbing into the higher registers again.

Although Dustin was disturbed by the thought of mysterious government agents manipulating the citizenry, he was still impressed. "You guys can really do that?"

Harrington smiled. "Dude, you wouldn't believe it. Dr. Owens can do *anything*. I mean, the guy pulls strings like..." He paused, perplexed. "What do you call those guys who pull a lot of strings?"

"Puppet master," said Dustin.

"Right!" Steve nodded eagerly. "Owens is like a puppet master. He has agents everywhere. The guy can do things you wouldn't believe."

"Like abduct kids and make them disappear," Mike said sourly.

"Hey, hey!" said Steve. "We're the good guys! The United States government does not make kids disappear."

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "Um... Will? Eleven?"

Steve hesitated. "The United States government does not make kids disappear *anymore*."

"And what do you think you're doing right now?" Max asked.

"Come on, you guys are *eighteen*! You're adults! I'm making *adults* disappear. Wait a minute, that came out wrong."

"Steve, this is bullshit!" Mike complained. "We are not going to call our parents on the phone and tell them we have the plague!"

"No, you're not," Steve agreed. "You're going to call them on the phone and tell them you've been *exposed* to the plague. But, you know, other than that you're fine."

"Steve..." Dustin began.

Harrington wasn't hearing it. "Dr. Owens needs you in New Mexico. Case closed."

"It's not closed!" Mike shouted. "Final exams start in a week! We need to study! We can't go gallivanting off in the desert in the middle of fucking nowhere!"

"So, first of all, Dr. Owens will take care of your exams. Congratulations, you all get A plusses."

Max's eyebrows shot up. "Wait, this is actually starting to sound pretty good."

"Second of all," Steve continued, "I'm surprised at you, Wheeler. I thought you would have jumped at this chance."

Mike huffed, crossing his slender arms over his chest. "And why would I do that?"

"Because El is in New Mexico. If you just shut the hell up and do what I say, you'll see her in twelve hours."

Silence fell over the car. Dustin sighed. That pretty much settled it, they were going to New Mexico. Mike would go to the moon and back if it gave him a chance to see El.

"El?" the skinny teen whispered.

"That's right. El."

Mike looked awkwardly around the jeep. Dustin grinned at him. Lucas shrugged. Max rolled her eyes.

"Um..." said Mike. "Okay. Tell us more."

* * *

Steve broke it down for them as he drove. Dr. Owens had dispatched him and Dart to Indiana the day before, to protect Mike and his friends from the marauding creatures of the Upside Down. Steve had thought there was just the one demogorgon. The fact that there were

at least three was an unsettling development.

"They're coming in force," Steve said. "We don't know where their Gate is, but this is seriously bad news."

"So why are they after me?" Mike asked.

Steve shrugged. "Honestly, Wheeler? I don't know. Dr. Owens didn't say. Henderson's theory that it's revenge for killing the Kraken makes sense to me, but truthfully, I have no idea. All I know is that the Upside Down seems to have gotten a real hard-on for you, and Dr. Owens is determined to keep you safe."

"Well, that's good to hear," Mike said weakly.

"So wait a minute," Max said. "If it's Mike they're after, do you really need the rest of us? Not that I'm complaining about an automatic A plus or anything. I mean, you guys can still go ahead and do that."

Steve shook his head. "Owens was clear — you and Lucas and Dustin have to come too. He said you make a good team."

"Great," Max said, frowning at Mike. "A good team. They can put that on my headstone."

For a while they rumbled down the highway in silence, with only the occasional headlights of a passing car to keep them company. Dart had curled up in the bed of the jeep and appeared to be asleep, though with the demodog it was always hard to tell.

"How did you know where to find us?" Dustin asked eventually. "We're still in high school, so what made you think to come to the university?"

"Dr. Owens told me where to find you," said Steve. "He said you've been sneaking into the computer lab there to do those hacks. That's one of the reasons he told me to bring all of you — he's got some kind of project for you."

"What, does he need us to break in somewhere? Like a heist?"

"No. He's got me and the rest of Remo's squad for that. I think he

wants you to help him with some programming or code-breaking or whatever it is you've been doing."

"Well, he doesn't need me then," said Max. "These guys are the computer dorks. I just do the breaking and entering."

Steve shook his head. "You're going with us, Mayfield, so stop trying to get out of it."

Max scowled.

"Where exactly *are* we going?" Lucas asked.

"There's an Army base just north of Indianapolis. We're taking a military cargo plane from there to another base in Roswell. I'll drive you from there."

"Roswell?" Dustin asked. "As in 1947 UFO crash Roswell? That Roswell?"

Steve laughed. "I should have known you'd make the connection, Henderson. Yeah, we're flying to the UFO capital of the world. Try not to get probed."

* * *

Fort Nevis Army Base

Indianapolis, Indiana

Sunday, April 24, 1988

It was one in the morning by the time they reached the base. The guard at the gate peered suspiciously at the teenagers, but snapped to attention when he saw the patch on Steve's arm. He waved the jeep through without another word.

"He didn't even search us," Lucas said.

“Good thing,” said Dustin. “Otherwise he would have found Dart under that tarp.”

“This OSS badge takes care of a lot of problems,” Steve told them. “Most of the soldiers here have no idea what we do, but they know they shouldn’t ask questions. And the other thing about the badge, it gives you access to some pretty cool resources.” He pointed ahead. “For instance, that’s our ride.”

Dustin followed Steve’s finger and his eyes widened. The older boy was pointing at an enormous four-engined cargo plane that hulked on the base’s airfield. A hatch was lowered at the rear of the craft, creating a ramp into the fuselage big enough for a tank. Ground crew scrambled around the plane, readying it for flight.

“That’s a C-130,” Lucas said, impressed.

“Holy shit,” Dustin gasped, “Owens has his own Hercules?”

Steve laughed. “No. We’ve got a big budget, but not *that* big. We’re just hitching a ride.”

They crossed the airfield and pulled up at the base of the ramp. Steve rolled down his window as an airman approached. After a hushed conversation, the airman passed a clipboard through the window. Steve signed off on a form, ripped out a yellow carbon copy and gave the clipboard back.

He sighed as he rolled up the window. “The one thing I didn’t expect about this job is all the paperwork. It’s like the government has a form for *everything*. Trust me on this — hunting monsters for a living isn’t as glamorous as it sounds.”

He drove the jeep up the ramp and parked in the C-130’s cavernous fuselage. Dustin and his friends climbed out of the car, gawking at the crates and boxes filling the plane’s interior.

“I think these are grenades,” Mike whispered, pointing at a crate.

“Rocket launcher in this one,” Lucas murmured.

Steve pulled the tarp off the back of the jeep to reveal Dart. The

demodog yawned — an extraordinary, gaping, five-jawed yawn — and stretched.

"We lift off in twenty," Steve said. "Grab some seats there at the side. When the hatch closes and that light turns red, buckle in."

"Before you finish abducting us, Steve, aren't you forgetting something?" asked Max. "Like, we didn't bring any clothes with us? No toothbrushes or toothpaste or basically anything?"

"Ah," Steve said. "When the CDC agents talk to your parents tomorrow, they'll also pick up your things. Your stuff should be in New Mexico by tomorrow night. In the meantime, there's some fatigues and toiletry kits in those footlockers over there."

Max sniffed angrily. "Well, I guess you've just thought of everything."

"Always prepared, Mayfield. Just like the Boy Scouts."

Dustin's friends wandered off then into the depths of the fuselage. The curly-haired boy went to the back of the jeep.

"Hey buddy," he said, holding out his hand to Dart. "Remember me?"

The demodog regarded him for a moment. The creature had no recognizable nose, but he pushed his faceless head against Dustin's fingers and seemed to sniff them.

Then he wagged his tail.

"You remember me! Good boy!" Dustin said, delighted. He gently patted Dart's head. "I wish I had some candy for you, but I'm afraid I'm all out right now."

Just then Steve gave a sharp whistle. "Dart! Over here." The older boy reached into a pocket and pulled out a handful of Three Musketeers bars. With an eager bark, Dart leapt from the bed of the jeep and raced over to him, bouncing excitedly like a terrier at dinner time.

Steve unwrapped the bars and tossed them one by one to the demodog, who swallowed them whole.

"You... you keep Three Musketeers for him?" Dustin asked.

"Sure," said Steve. "I always give him some after an op. It keeps him motivated."

"Huh," Dustin said. For some reason, the thought of Steve giving the demodog candy irritated him. *He* was the one who fed Dart, from way back when the creature was just a pollywog. He shook the feeling away. This was Steve, after all. His best friend.

Speaking of which...

"Hey, Steve," he said, making a humming noise and putting his hands together like he was holding a sword.

Harrington looked at him blankly. "What are you doing?"

"Lightsabers! Remember?"

Comprehension dawned on Steve's face. The older boy grinned, putting his own hands together. The two friends clashed their invisible blades in mock combat. They swung once, twice, and then Dustin mock-stabbed Steve in the chest. Harrington gurgled and mimed his insides spilling out, then he burst out laughing.

"Man, I haven't done that in a while!" Steve said.

"Me neither!" Dustin grinned. "Wow, it's really good to see you, Steve. Look at you! Tell me what you've been doing—"

Steve held up a hand. "Hey, sorry, Henderson. We're going to take off soon and I still need to get Dart settled and check in with command. Let me go take care of this stuff. We'll catch up later."

"Oh," Dustin said. "Right. Later."

"Cool. That's my guy." Steve clapped him on the shoulder, then turned and walked away. "Come on, Dart!" the older boy called. The demodog scrambled to his side and walked beside him like a loyal hound.

Like best buddies.

Dustin frowned. He felt... odd. He couldn't describe the feeling exactly, but it wasn't the bubbling happiness he thought he should feel.

Steve was his friend. Dart was his friend. Obviously, there was a lot going on and they were busy, and Dustin understood that. But he hadn't seen them in two years.

He felt like he still hadn't.

* * *

The VLA Observatory

San Agustin Plains, New Mexico

Sunday, April 24, 1988

El sorted through the printouts, arranging them into folders by date and telescope number. It was a mindless task, just a little piece of administration, but she didn't mind because it kept her busy. It kept her from thinking about Papa or dwelling on her loneliness and how much she missed Mike.

She liked to be helpful, but when she wasn't roaming the Void for Dr. Owens, there wasn't much she could really do. So she sorted and filed, especially when there was nothing else to occupy her, which was most of the time.

She got so lost in the task, her mind drifting, that she didn't notice Ewan come into the room until he was right next to her.

"Hey," he murmured in her ear and El was so startled she shrieked. Printouts flew everywhere as she jumped in surprise. Relief and embarrassment flooded over her when she realized who it was.

"Ewan!" she gasped, laughing and blushing at how silly she must have seemed.

Ewan also laughed, gently — not mocking her, just amused by her reaction. He knelt and started picking up papers. "Sorry about that, I didn't mean to startle you. I thought you knew I was there."

He held up the printouts for her, still down on one knee, a friendly smile on his handsome face. El couldn't stop blushing as she snatched the papers from his hand.

"You should be sorry," she said in mock anger. "You almost gave me a heart attack!"

He collected the last few papers and stood up. "Then I really am sorry, because that's the last thing I'd want to happen to your heart." He gave her a friendly nudge with his shoulder and El giggled, granting him a smile and letting him know he was forgiven.

He stood near her, close enough that she could smell his nice clean scent, a mix of detergent and soap and the vaguest hint of cedar. "What are you working on?" he asked, the back of his hand brushing absently — surely unthinkingly — against her hip.

"I'm just filing some of these papers for Dr. Owens," she told him. "They're printouts of the data from last week."

"From the Oort Cloud?" Ewan asked, leaning closer so he could see better. He was very near, his shoulder pressing against hers. El found herself holding her breath and wasn't really sure why.

"Yes," she said, her eyes flicking over his face.

He was a very nice-looking young man. He wasn't as handsome as Mike, of course — no one was. But El found that she liked looking at him. As Sully once told her, Ewan was easy on the eyes.

He was tall, although she suspected he wasn't as tall as Mike. She'd never seen them next to each other, so it was hard to say. Ewan was definitely broader, wider across the shoulders, more filled out and muscled. It wasn't that Ewan was burly or fat — he was actually fairly slender — it was just that Mike was so skinny. She thought Ewan probably weighed more than Mike despite being shorter.

In their appearance, the two boys were very different. Mike had a

prominent nose while Ewan's was smaller. Both of them had thick hair, but where Mike's was long and black and rather curly, Ewan's was shorter, brown and wavy. Mike had a sharp face, all points and angles, while Ewan's was more regular, his features balanced and in perfect proportion. Ewan's face looked like something you would see in a magazine ad, selling sweaters or toothpaste or aftershave.

Mike was the most beautiful boy in the world and El could stare at him for hours, memorizing the lines of his face. But Mike wasn't here, he was far away, and in his absence it was nice to look at Ewan.

"Do you need any help?" the boy asked, and El blinked, realizing she'd been staring. Ewan rested his hands on the table, the act emphasizing the lines of muscle in his arms.

The question was so like him. Ewan was very nice and always happy to help her when he wasn't busy with his programming. He was a wonderful friend, one of the first new friends she'd made since she moved away from Hawkins. She hoped someday she could introduce him to Mike and the rest of the Party and they could all be friends together.

"No, that's okay," she said. "This is just boring paperwork. You must have something more fun to do."

"I really don't," he said, smiling. "Nothing says 'Sunday funday' to me like filing printouts."

El liked the little teasing note in his voice, the way he gently made fun of himself and her. It was his way of making it easy to accept his help. He was always thoughtful that way.

"Well—" she began and paused as Dr. Owens entered the room.

"Hey, there you kids are," Owens said, smiling broadly. The stocky man always seemed pleased with the world, except in those rare moments when he didn't and he became very frightening.

"Did you need us, Dr. Owens?" Ewan asked.

"I'm actually just bringing some good news for our young lady here," Owens said.

"For me?" said El. "What is it?"

"It's more interesting than sorting data files, I'll tell you that," Owens said, glancing at the piles of printouts. "We've got four visitors coming in from Roswell in a few hours. I thought you might want to meet them."

"Okay," El said, confused. She didn't usually meet with the scientists who visited the Project, in part because Dr. Owens wanted to keep knowledge of her powers a secret.

"Oh, maybe I should read you their names," Owens grinned, pulling a sheet of paper from his pocket. He peered closely at the document, as if he'd forgotten what it said. "Let's see... Henderson comma Dustin..."

El gave a little gasp.

"...Mayfield comma Maxine... Sinclair comma Lucas..."

El's heart pounded. She closed her eyes, hoping and yet so afraid to hope.

The final name couldn't be Mike's. The world wouldn't allow her to be that happy.

It couldn't be.

"...and, let's see... Wheeler comma Michael."

It was.

After ten long months, he was on his way here. He would be here in just a few hours.

Mike.

She turned to Ewan, wondering if she would ever be able to get the smile off her face.

"Did you hear that, Ewan? It's Mike! Mike's coming here!"

The boy smiled back at her, a strange smile that she'd never seen on him before. It wasn't full and happy like her own, but something like a half-smile, a little quirk of his lips.

"Great," Ewan said, and El thought his voice was oddly flat. "That's great."

3. The Worries

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello again everyone, and welcome back to another chapter of All The Days. I'm sorry this one took so long. Unfortunately, real life intruded and I had to do some traveling for a few weeks. That's hard enough at the best of times but in the age of Covid it's a nightmare. It's definitely not conducive to writing! Luckily, my travels seem to be finished (for now).

At any rate, I hope you enjoy this next chapter and I hope everyone is doing well and staying healthy! Thank you as always for taking time out of your busy day to read along.

**Fort Walker Army Base
Roswell, New Mexico
Sunday, April 24, 1988**

Two sharp raps sounded on the door and Mike jerked awake.

"Rise and shine, Wheeler!" Steve called. "We're on the road in thirty!"

Mike fumbled through a fog of sleep, his eyes searching the darkness of the little room. Dim light filtered through the blinds and he made out a desk and a chair against one wall. Above them was a poster: *US Army, Be All That You Can Be*. There was nothing else but his narrow bed and a clock reading 10:01 AM.

He remembered then. They'd landed in Roswell at the Army base just after five in the morning. Steve ushered the teens off the C-130 and led them across the tarmac to the barracks. They'd been assigned to officers' quarters.

"You're lucky to get digs like this," Harrington told them. "Usually you'd bunk with the grunts, but this will keep people from asking questions. Don't expect the Ritz Carlton — in the military we work for

a living. It's small, but you each have your own room and your own shower. Now grab some shuteye — we're on the road at 1030 hours."

Dustin, Lucas and Max nodded wearily. Mike scowled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Why are we stopping?" he demanded. "Let's just get on the road now."

Steve shook his head. "Shuteye, Wheeler. You've been up for twenty-four hours. Get some rest."

"I'm not tired," Mike insisted. He could sense his friends exchanging glances.

Harrington laid a hand on his shoulder. "Look, Wheeler, I know you can't wait to see El. But *I'm* the one who has to drive and *I* need to sleep. I don't care what you do until we leave, but if you're smart you'll look at the backs of your eyelids."

"Come on, Mike," said Lucas. "You've waited ten months. A few more hours won't kill you."

Mike agreed with as much grace as he could muster. He grudgingly let Steve direct him toward one of the small officer's rooms. Soon he was lying on a bed that was little more than steel springs and a mattress. He stared at the ceiling, fidgeting, certain he wouldn't be able to sleep.

That was the last thing he remembered.

Now he heard Steve knocking on another door, shouting for Lucas to get up. There was a tone of command in Harrington's voice, something that had never been there before. The older boy had changed in the two years since he left Hawkins.

All kinds of things might have changed in the last two years. Butterflies swooped and rolled in Mike's stomach at the thought.

El.

He pulled himself out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. The least he could do was shower and try to be presentable when he finally saw her again. He pulled off his t-shirt and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

Oh god.

Mike gawked at his scrawny frame. What in the world had he been doing with himself? He'd had two years to hit the gym and build some muscle. *Two years.* But had he done anything? No.

He'd always meant to start working out. Somehow he never got around to it. There was always something in the way, things like schoolwork and studies and helping Dr. Owens.

Oh, who was he kidding? Things like television and video games and Dungeons & Dragons.

He groaned, dragging a hand across his face. Then he took a deep breath, glared at the mirror, and flexed. *Good lord.* He could practically hear Arnold Schwarzenegger laughing and calling him a girly man.

It was terrible. At least he was tall — almost six feet and still growing. Admittedly his height and slender build made people use the words "bean pole" a lot, but that couldn't be helped.

He ran a hand through his hair. He'd grown it long, trying for a cool rock star look. He wasn't sure he'd achieved that, but at least it didn't scream *dork* like the bowl cut he used to wear.

It wasn't such a bad look, he thought. Girls liked skinny long-haired rockers, right? Chris Robinson of the Black Crowes got tons of girls, and he didn't have muscles or a pretty face. Granted, the guy was also rich and famous and lead singer of an awesome band.

Mike sighed, rubbing a hand across his hairless chest. He paused. Hairless. He didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. A lack of chest hair wasn't exactly *manly*, but he'd heard girls back in Hawkins joke about guys who had too much. Was body hair sexy or gross? It seemed like it depended on the girl. Mike wasn't sure where El came down on the whole issue.

She liked *Miami Vice* though. The star of that show was a pretty hairy guy. He had permanent stubble on his jaw, while Mike couldn't grow facial hair to save his life. He'd tried once, but a week of Dustin's "Wolfman" jokes put a quick end to that.

Mike groaned again. For a moment, he wondered how it would feel to look in the mirror and like what you saw. What would it be like to enjoy seeing yourself in photographs? Lucas must know, and Will, and El. It probably felt great.

He shook his head. He had to stop torturing himself. El had told him more than once that he was beautiful. Whatever disappointments he felt about his appearance, she didn't share them. She loved the way he looked, and more important, she loved *him*.

She loved him.

But they'd been apart for two years and people changed.

* * *

**The VLA Observatory
San Agustin Plains, New Mexico
Sunday, April 24, 1988**

El paced back and forth in her room, fretting. She'd laid out every single piece of clothing she had and none of her outfits were right. They didn't *work*. Mike was just a few hours away and *nothing worked*.

At least Dr. Owens had given her some warning. She'd have been mortified if Mike showed up and caught her in sweatpants and a t-shirt. Sure, it was her favorite t-shirt, the one with a telescope and the words, *Get Stars In Your Eyes*. But the thing was *dorky*.

Dorky wouldn't do.

No, El needed gorgeous. She needed *sexy*. She wanted Mike's jaw to drop when she walked in the room. That could only mean...

The Daisy Dukes.

She snatched the denim shorts off her bed. They were cut-offs, the ends neatly rolled up. They were just on the right side of *cheeky* and they showed off her legs to best advantage. They also showed... other things... to best advantage.

Max liked to call them her “ass pants.” The red haired girl joked that El should only wear them in emergencies, because Mike was an ass man and his heart couldn't take it. Well, this was an emergency.

El quickly shed her sweatpants and pulled on the tight shorts. Yes. Perfect. Now, she would match them with... her frilly white blouse. It was light and pretty and feminine and Mike would love it.

She pulled off her t-shirt and frowned in the mirror. The bra was okay, she supposed, lacy and white, but...

She sighed. God, her boobs simply refused to get any bigger. Her hips and behind had rounded out over the years — maybe even a little too much, if she was being honest — but her chest was holding firm at two little... bumps.

She threw on the blouse, experimenting with how many buttons to leave open. If she went with three, and then pushed her arms together like *this*... Yes, there it was. Cleavage. Great. All she had to do now was walk around all day with her arms pressed to her sides. Because that wouldn't be weird.

She shook her head, starting to feel a bit panicked and also rather ridiculous. She'd have to try something else. What if, when she was talking to Mike, she rested her hands on the table *like this* and then she leaned forward...? Yes. A little peek down the shirt at some nicely rounded swells. That was sure to set Mike's heart racing. She'd just have to find the right moment and try not to flash the whole room in the process.

El stared in the mirror again, still frowning. She started to fuss with her hair. It was short, not even shoulder length. She thought that was okay. Mike always liked her with short hair. He'd fallen in love with her when she had short hair and they'd actually broken up when she

grew it longer. So really, short was the only realistic option—

She groaned. She had to stop this. Mike loved her. He didn't care how long her hair was or if her boobs were small or her butt was big. He loved *her*, not her looks. For goodness sake, when they first met she had a shaved head and a body like a twig. And Mike still fell in love with her.

But two years was a long time and people changed.

She'd fretted about that in the months and years they'd been apart. There was no denying that Mike was incredibly handsome, easily the most attractive boy she'd ever met. He had a wonderful towering height and a lean greyhound body. He had these incredibly graceful hands, with long, slender fingers that trailed fire on her skin every time he touched her.

Then there were his eyes, glorious deep brown pools where El could happily drown. As if that wasn't enough, he had lovely sharp cheekbones and a wide, generous mouth with full lips that seemed purpose-built for kissing.

On top of Mike's astonishing good looks, he was smart and funny and kind and friendly and so very easy to talk to. He seemed to know pretty much everything, but he never made you feel stupid. He listened so generously, like your words were the most important thing in the world. Being around Mike Wheeler just made you feel *good*.

The line of girls waiting to date him back in Hawkins probably stretched around the block.

El moaned as that image filled her mind. It would be a line of pretty girls, of course, with nice smiles and big boobs. They'd be normal girls with normal lives, girls who hadn't spent their first twelve years locked in a lab. They'd know how to flirt and have normal conversations and they'd understand all the everyday things that El found so baffling. When Mike told a joke, those girls would laugh instead of staring at him blankly.

Honestly, after two years apart, around girls like that, how could

Mike *not* be tempted...

No. She had to stop this. Mike loved her. Mike loved her and he wouldn't do that to her. She was just feeling insecure. That was understandable, since her boyfriend was literally the greatest guy in the world. What girl wouldn't feel a bit out of her league?

She had to remember that Mike was a great guy and he wouldn't go sneaking around on her. If someone else had won his heart, he would have the decency to let her know. He would say something.

Of course, Mike hadn't been able to talk to her for ten months. There wasn't any way he *could* say something...

Oh my god, stop! she screamed at herself. She was being silly. Mike loved her and she loved him. In a few short hours she would see him again, and they would be together, and everything would be all right.

Wouldn't it?

* * *

**State Route 380
Roswell, New Mexico
Sunday, April 24, 1988**

Mike stared out the jeep's window as downtown Roswell rolled past. He hadn't been sure what to expect from the place and he was surprised to discover that it was very... normal. There were gas stations and fast food; houses and apartment blocks; shopping malls and thrift stores. The place was bigger than Hawkins but smaller than Chicago, and the people went about their business the same way they did anywhere else. The sun was bright, the town was hot and rather dusty, and maybe there wasn't as much grass as Mike was used to. But Roswell was a town like any other.

Except of course for the UFO museum. And the street lights.

"That's so cool!" Dustin gasped. "They painted little eyes on the lamps so they look like aliens!"

Max snorted. "Seriously, that is lame. Is this town that desperate for tourist dollars?"

"It's awesome," Dustin insisted. "It's the perfect way to celebrate our first tangible evidence of visitors from another world. Am I right, Mike?"

Lost in his thoughts, Mike nodded absently. "Um, yeah. It's awesome."

Dustin frowned at his lack of enthusiasm.

Lucas shook his head. "Come on, Dustin, don't tell me you believe all that BS. It wasn't a crashed alien ship. It was a weather balloon."

"That's just what they want you to believe," Dustin said. "That's exactly the kind of story the government peddles when it's trying to cover something up. It's all part of a vast disinformation campaign designed to keep the truth from the American public."

"It was a weather balloon!"

"Lucas, whether you like it or not, an alien spaceship crashed near Roswell in 1947. The soldiers who found it even reported it as an alien ship. It was in all the newspapers!"

"The soldiers made a mistake!" Lucas insisted. "They'd seen too many science-fiction movies about little green men from outer space."

"Grey men," Dustin said. "Little grey men." He waved his friend's objections away. "It was a flying saucer, Lucas. You have to remember, this all happened before President Truman set up Majestic-12, so there were no contact protocols in place. The soldiers didn't know they should keep the crash quiet, and there were no Men in Black yet to threaten them if they talked. Eventually the government put out the cover story about a weather balloon, but it was too late. For anyone paying attention, the truth is out there."

Lucas looked helplessly at Max. The red haired girl smirked. "What, like you're surprised to find out he believes in this stuff? Any minute now he'll start talking about the Trilateral Commission and Delta Green."

“Oh, ha ha,” said Dustin. “Go ahead and make jokes. But I’m surprised you guys are so skeptical. I mean, not only is there a creature from another dimension *in this very vehicle*, but you guys have seen the cover-ups that Dr. Owens can pull off. There is no doubt that there’s a secret government conspiracy to hide the existence of alien life. Back me up here, Steve.”

Behind the wheel, Harrington shrugged. “Don’t drag me into this, Henderson — I just work here. Cover-ups and conspiracies are way above my paygrade. I leave all that cloak and dagger stuff to the professionals.” He hesitated, looking around as if to ensure no one was listening. “But... what I can tell you is that there’s a reason the Project is based in New Mexico around a bunch of radio telescopes. And it’s not because Dr. Owens likes to look at the stars.”

Dustin’s eyes widened. Max blinked in surprise. “Holy shit, Steve,” she said, “you mean there really are aliens?”

The older boy shook his head. “Like I said, Mayfield, that’s above my paygrade. It’s on a need to know basis and Dr. Owens decides who needs to know. All I can say is if there is something out there... well, it probably isn’t cute and friendly like E.T. or those little dudes from *Close Encounters*.”

Steve’s words were intriguing enough to briefly pull Mike from his thoughts of El. He turned the older boy’s comments over in his mind, wondering what Steve was trying to tell them without coming out and saying it.

Mike had always assumed that Dr. Owens’ mysterious Project was focused on the Upside Down — but maybe it was something else? Maybe it was aliens? That hardly seemed credible. Still, Mike hadn’t believed in demogorgons either... until one showed up in Hawkins and started killing people.

Dustin, Lucas and Max whispered furiously, now and then prodding Steve with another question. Despite their efforts, the older boy refused to say any more. After a while, silence fell over the car.

They drove on into New Mexico’s endless desert and Mike returned to his thoughts. His mind went down familiar paths, coming always and

forever to the same destination.

El.

God, how he missed her. It had been two years since they'd spent any real time together. Mike tried to stay focused on the now, tried to keep his head in the present, but he still seemed to spend every waking moment reliving that last magical summer with her. That was the best summer — the best *anything* — of Mike's entire life.

That summer, he and his friends had traveled from Hawkins to Maine to see El and the Byers. Once they arrived, they stumbled across a secret plot to bring the Upside Down back into the world. In the process, they exposed a nefarious alliance between Martin Brenner, the Soviets and the Mind Flayer. As usual, the authorities were no help and were even part of the problem. There was no one to stop the evil plot but Mike and his friends.

When all was said and done, they saved the world. Mike died. Somehow, somehow, El's love brought him back to life.

And that was just the first week.

After saving the world, Mike and El spent the rest of that summer in a blissful haze. They talked and they laughed and sometimes they were just quietly together. Always they were wrapped in a warm blanket of love.

Sometimes, during that magical summer, they did things that weren't talking or laughing, and that weren't quiet either. Mike remembered those moments late at night or early in the morning, moments of smooth skin and soft lips and El saying his name. Those moments stirred his heart, the way every moment with El stirred his heart. Those moments were a facet — but just one facet — of the way that Mike loved her.

When the summer was over, they promised to see each other again at Christmas. Mike counted down the days, waiting as the leaves turned from green to gold. He waited as the trees went bare and the snows came. Then there were three wonderful days filled with family and friends and most of all with El. Those three days made all the waiting

worthwhile.

Then, the day after Christmas, Dr. Owens appeared and he took El away. She didn't want to go, and Mike and Joyce argued furiously with the old scientist. Then Owens said the magic word.

Hopper.

There was no helping it. El had to leave. Mike watched her go, filled with sadness but also with hope. Maybe, he thought, just maybe, this mad journey they'd started when they were twelve years old was almost over. Maybe El would find Hopper and after that there would be no more demogorgons or Russians to keep them apart.

Mike didn't hear from her again until March. Owens and Steve had sworn her to secrecy and she couldn't tell him what happened, where she'd been, what she'd done. All she could tell him was that they hadn't found Hopper.

They made plans for El to come to Hawkins in June. She was there for one day and then Dr. Owens took her away again. Mike hadn't heard from her since.

In the two years since that perfect summer in Maine, Mike had seen El for all of four days.

Life was bitter sometimes.

* * *

**The VLA Observatory
San Agustin Plains, New Mexico
Sunday, April 24, 1988**

For a long time there was nothing but the desert. It was a vast emptiness drifting past the window, colored the pale yellow of dust and sandstone. Now and then a red cliff or a green field of juniper punctuated the monotony.

Mike's watch told him that four hours had passed before the shapes

appeared on the horizon. As the jeep drew closer, the shapes resolved themselves, turning from little white triangles into great towers of steel that reached into the sky. Huge dishes capped the towers that Mike now recognized as radio telescopes.

“It’s called the Very Large Array,” Steve said. “Or VLA for short. Twenty telescopes that can act independently or in concert. They’re mounted on wheels and move on those railroad tracks you see there. When they’re working together at maximum resolution, they’re basically like a single telescope with a dish three miles wide. The VLA can see further into space than any other observatory on Earth.”

Dustin eyed the big towers. “Anything in particular they’re looking for, Steve?”

Harrington smiled. “Not for me to say, Henderson. If Dr. Owens wants you to know, he’ll tell you. Otherwise, it’s—”

“Above your paygrade. Yeah, I heard.”

Mike stared at the telescopes, impressed. He’d read about the VLA in his science magazines. It was a technological miracle, human ingenuity at its finest. Mike couldn’t imagine what El had been doing here for the last ten months, but astronomers would give up their firstborn for this kind of opportunity.

Soon they were headed for a large structure in the middle of the telescopes, a two-story complex of brick and concrete with a round central tower and two long wings.

“That’s the main building,” Steve said. “There’s a museum and visitors center in that middle tower. Computer banks, server farms and data processing are in the left wing, also dorm rooms and staff offices. Those are the areas that the public and the visiting scientists get to see. As for the wing on the right... that’s the Project. That’s where we’re going.”

He turned the jeep down a side road and drove them along the length of the building.

“We’re not going in through the visitor center?” asked Dustin.

“I’ll take you there later,” said Steve. “We have to go in through the back because Dart tends to scare the straights. Keep in mind that most of the people who work here don’t know about the Project. Even the ones who support it only know enough to do their jobs. Dr. Owens and a few others have the whole picture, but that’s it.”

“That makes sense,” said Lucas. “It’s easier to keep a big project secret if the work is compartmentalized. If someone leaks or gets turned by the enemy, they can’t give too much away.” Max gave him a surprised look and he shrugged. “I read that in *Soldier of Fortune*.”

“Last month’s issue,” Steve agreed. “Yeah, that was a good one. But anyway, the point is that most people are in the dark so you need to keep quiet. Definitely don’t mention Dart. If rumors got started about him, we’d have UFO nuts and conspiracy theorists coming out of the woodwork.”

“Right,” said Max, looking at Dustin. “We definitely wouldn’t want that.”

The curly-haired boy calmly shot her the finger and Max laughed.

Steve drove them around the end of the building and brought the jeep to a halt next to a loading dock. The dock was empty and the main loading gate was closed, but an unremarkable brown door at one side stood open.

“Here we are,” said Steve.

Mike sucked in a breath, his stomach knotted with nerves. This was it.

It was time to see El.

The moment felt unreal somehow, a feeling only heightened by the sight of Dart slithering out from under his tarp. The demodog leapt from the jeep and scrambled up the steps of the loading dock, eager to escape the bright sun. Mike knew sunlight didn’t hurt the creature — demodogs and their brethren could operate perfectly well in the day — but he also knew things from the Upside Down preferred the dark. Dart stopped in the shade of the open doorway and looked back,

waiting for the humans to follow.

Mike's heart pounded with every step. He was here at last. After two long years of separation, after ten months of total silence, everything that mattered in his life was through that door. He climbed the steps of the loading dock, went to the door, and stepped inside.

And there she was.

Mike was vaguely aware of the room, an industrial space with boxes and crates stacked against the wall. There were some soldiers in the black fatigues of the OSS standing by a table where they'd been playing cards. Some part of Mike's mind registered the presence of Will Byers, his old friend from Hawkins. Dart danced around the small boy, barking eagerly. Mike saw all of those things and yet he didn't, like they were the blurred background of a wide aperture photo.

The only thing he really saw was El.

She was standing motionless, as if afraid to move, and she stared at him, searching his face with her enormous brown eyes. He realized he must be staring the same way, longing and hope and worry playing across his features the way they played across hers.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered.

His heart ached as he drank her in. Her big eyes and pert little nose and soft, pink, pillowy lips. Her flawless skin, kissed by the sun. Her hair, short and parted on the side, but full and wavy and curling underneath her ears.

She'd filled out some, he thought — a little less coltish now and a little more womanly — but she was as small and delicate as ever. She hadn't gotten any taller and barely came up to his chin. Her slender bare legs seemed to stretch on and on up to flaring hips wrapped in snug denim shorts. Her curves nipped into a tight, trim waist. A hint of taut skin peeked out from under the hem of her blouse.

Mike swallowed hard. When he last saw El, she was already the most beautiful girl in the world. Now she outshone the stars.

He realized they were both still motionless, still staring. He shifted

nervously, suddenly conscious of what El must see. He was an awkward scarecrow, all skin and bones in borrowed camouflage pants and an olive drab t-shirt. His mop of black hair must look like a bird's nest. Next to El, he was... ludicrous. The two of them were a stable boy and a princess, a street sweeper and a queen.

What did she think when she saw him? What was that look in her eyes? After two years apart, after ten months of silence, did she still...?

El took a hesitant step forward and Mike did the same. She kept walking and so did he and the gap between them closed and then she was in his arms. El's soft lips pressed against his in a kiss that was almost desperate, and all he could think was that it was so, so good. Her little fingers tangled in his hair and the kiss deepened. Mike was lost in the feel of *El*, in the joy of being *with El*, and his heart pounded out its message to her over and over again.

I love you I love you I love you I love you.

Eventually, reluctantly, the kiss ended, but Mike wouldn't stop holding her and she wouldn't stop holding him.

"El," he murmured.

"Mike," she said.

"I missed you so much—" he began and she kissed him again.

This kiss lasted a very long time. Mike trailed his hands over her back, down to her hips, reminding himself of the way she felt under his fingers. There was softness and firmness all at once, and the skin at her waist like velvet. El's lips wouldn't leave his, pressed against him with an urgency that set his thoughts on fire.

After awhile, Mike became vaguely aware of awkward coughing. Lucas loudly cleared his throat. The OSS soldiers shuffled their feet.

Finally Max said, "Okay you two, maybe you should save some of that for later."

Blushing, Mike and El broke the kiss.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Oh Mike," she breathed, "I love you too."

Max, Lucas and Dustin wrapped her up then in an enormous hug. El giggled, tangled happily in the arms of her friends. Mike watched them for a moment, still a little breathless from the kiss, and he couldn't help but smile at the joy on El's face.

Then he turned to see Will, one of his oldest friends, the boy whose disappearance years ago had transformed Mike's life. They looked at each other for a moment, feeling the weight of two years apart. Then Will smiled and Mike laughed and they embraced.

"Good to see you, buddy," Mike said.

The small boy hugged him tighter. "You too, Mike."

Dart circled the two of them, barking and growling with excitement. Even as Mike released the hug and stepped away, the demodog nuzzled Will's hand. To Mike's surprise, Will barked a couple of times and flashed an odd, wavy pattern at the demodog with his fingers. Dart clapped his front paws together and bounced around happily.

Will barked at the demodog again as Dustin joined them. Dart spun in a circle, wagging his tail. Then he nudged Will affectionately with his head.

Mike knew that Will had a connection to the Upside Down, a relic of his possession by the Mind Flayer as a young boy. Two years ago, that connection had evolved, and Will was able to understand the language of the Upside Down. In the past, that only went one way — Will could understand, but not speak. But now...

"You... you can talk to him?" Dustin asked.

Will shrugged. "Somewhat. It's not easy. Human vocal cords aren't really designed to speak Upside Down. A lot of their communication is non-verbal too — body posture, arm movements, things like that. Our conversations so far are pretty limited, but it's better than nothing. Every day we say a little bit more to each other." Will gently

patted Dart's head.

Dustin seemed taken aback by this new development. The smile faded from his face as he watched Will and the demodog.

Mike shifted awkwardly. He felt like he should say something, but he had no idea what. As he searched for words, a sight caught his eye that made him freeze.

El was hugging Steve.

It wasn't a casual, *hey good to see you* kind of hug that you shared with an acquaintance. It was a long, full-bodied, head-against-the-shoulder kind of hug that you gave to a dear friend. Or to more than a friend.

When the embrace ended, El peered at Steve's face, taking in his bruises and the cut above his eye — mementoes of his battle with the demogorgon in Indiana.

"Steve, you've been fighting!" she gasped. Her tone was almost accusatory.

The older boy shrugged, a guilty smile on his face. "Just a little bit."

"You told me the mission was going to be safe!" Now that tone was *definitely* accusatory.

"It was safe!" he insisted. "Mostly."

"Steve..."

He held up a placating hand. "El, seriously — I'm a professional. I'm not going to get into anything I can't handle."

She frowned at him, unconvinced.

"I swear!" he said.

She kept frowning, but finally asked, "Promise?"

Steve smiled. "I promise."

El rolled her eyes but hugged him again. All was forgiven. Steve patted her back gently.

Mike watched them, bewildered. He hadn't expected... *this*... from El and the older boy.

What the hell had he missed in the last two years?

Even as he tried to process what he'd just witnessed, another young man entered the room.

The newcomer looked to be nineteen or twenty. He was a little shorter than Mike and a bit heavier, with an athletic build and hints of firm muscle under his clothes. He had good looks like a movie star — a chiseled jaw, piercing blue eyes, and thick, wavy brown hair.

Mike stared in shock as the young man threw an arm around El's shoulders and hugged her against his side.

"Hey El," he said, "why don't you introduce me to your friends?"

Mike waited for El to pull away from the young man or push his arm off her shoulder, but she didn't. She just giggled a little and smiled. The boy's hand rested on her in a very *familiar* way and El leaned into him. Hell, she was almost... *snuggling*... against him.

Mike knew the expression "his blood ran cold." He'd heard it many times. That said, the expression was always a theoretical concept to him and he'd never actually experienced it.

Until now.

The sensation, an icy chill, started at his neck. It trailed down his spine and spread out into his arms. It even flowed into his fingers. Finally it went to his head where there was a strange shift in his perception, as if for a moment time itself was frozen.

Mike's blood ran cold.

"Everyone, this is my friend Ewan," said El.

Ewan smiled at them, a winning smile that belonged on a magazine

cover.His gaze roamed over the group and settled on Mike.Just for a moment — just for Mike — the look in the boy's eyes turned his smile into a sneer.

Then the moment was over and the sneer was gone.Anyone watching would have sworn it was never there.There was only that winning smile.

But Mike knew in that moment that he and this boy would never, ever be friends.

Notes for the Chapter:

Anachronism alert - according to Wikipedia, the Black Crowes formed in 1984 but didn't actually hit it big until 1989, one year after this story. But hell, close enough.

And in case anyone is interested, I headcanon Ewan as looking like the actor Tom Holland (of Spider-Man and Avengers fame). Obviously you're welcome to imagine his appearance however you want.

4. The Task

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone, it's been a long time. I'm afraid work has been terrible (and will continue to be terrible). I'm doing long hours and weekends, so as much as I love writing, most days all I have the energy for is grabbing a beer and vegging in front of the TV.

Still, here and there, now and then, I've managed to get some writing done. That has resulted in this: the next chapter of *All The Days*. It's a Max POV but perhaps a bit disjointed - since I worked on it infrequently, I never had a chance to get a proper flow going. When things finally calm down I might come back and give it a proper rewrite.

With all that said, I hope you enjoy it. Stay safe and be well.

State Route 380

San Agustin Plains, New Mexico

Sunday, April 24, 1988

It's not that Max Mayfield was a coward.

Far from it. Max was a daredevil. She was a skateboarding renegade. She'd survived three encounters with the Upside Down and six years as Billy Hargrove's stepsister. Just this year, she'd been voted *'Most Likely To Be A Getaway Driver'* by her high school class.

Max Mayfield knew adventure.

She just liked adventure on her own terms.

Doing skateboard tricks on the half-pipe while the local potsmokers gaped in awe? No problem.

Breaking into a computer lab to hack Russian mainframes? All good.

Running from demogorgons to the middle of Nowhere, New Mexico because of *Mike fucking Wheeler*? Now wait just a damn minute.

Wheeler was always doing this to her. *Always*. She'd gotten tangled up with the lanky, big-nosed nerd back in eighth grade and she'd been trapped in the disaster that was his life ever since. She wasn't even sure how it happened. One day she was minding her own business, trying to survive another afternoon with her douchebag stepfather. The next thing she knew, Max was running from dog monsters, stabbing her stepbrother with a hypo, and setting fire to a network of creepy underground tunnels.

The next year only got worse. And the year after that, and the year after that.

And why? Mike. Fucking. Wheeler. A guy madly in love with a girl who was too good for him. A guy who risked his own life *and everyone else's* to prove he deserved her.

Which was kind of romantic when you thought about it, but *for fuck's sake*.

The only reason Max put up with any of it was that Mike's girl was Max's best friend. Max was never one to leave a friend hanging. Oh, she'd bitch and she'd moan, because otherwise people wouldn't appreciate the sacrifice she was making, but at the end of the day she'd always help out.

Still, it would be nice to be *asked*. But no one ever asked. Instead, Max was dragged into one world-threatening apocalypse after another without so much as a thank you. It was enough to make her want to move back to California, as if she didn't have enough reasons for that already.

So as they drove across the desert from Roswell, Max made sure to broadcast her displeasure at the latest turn of events. She wasn't sure anyone noticed. Steve was busy at the wheel, and Wheeler was thinking about his girlfriend, and Dustin was just too cheerful and good-natured to realize she was furious. As for Lucas...

Honestly, she wasn't sure Lucas cared.

Max had been angry too many times. She and Lucas had fought too many times, they'd broken up too many times, and it seemed like Lucas just tuned her out these days. Oh, he went through the motions. He hung out with her on weekends and after school. He took her to the movies and the arcade and he bought her meals at Benny's. But something was... gone. Max couldn't shake the feeling that Lucas was phoning it in.

That they were both phoning it in.

Eventually the telescopes loomed on the horizon and they arrived at the observatory and things got a little better. For one, Max could look at something other than the monotonous yellow desert. For another, there was El.

The girl looked amazing, of course. She had big pretty eyes and slender long legs that Max could only envy. Her hair was cut in a short lob. It wouldn't work on most girls, but on El it just *fit*. The only word for her was 'beautiful' and Max would have said so even if El wasn't her best friend.

Wheeler clearly thought the same. When he walked into the Project and found El waiting for him, he stared at her with slack-jawed stupidity, the kind you found in backwoods hicks and people in love. It probably didn't help that El was wearing her ass pants, ultra-tight denim shorts guaranteed to make Wheeler drool.

There was slack-jawed wonder on El's face too. She stared at Mike as if afraid to believe he was really there. Her slender body trembled, like a fawn ready to bolt at the slightest sound. The young lovers drank each other in, lost in a moment of reunion after two long years apart. It was one of the sweetest, most romantic things Max had ever seen.

Then El and Mike launched into a public display of affection that deserved a brown wrapper and a parental warning label.

Romantic? El's tongue was so far down Mike's throat she could have been checking his tonsils. The way Mike's fingers trailed along her

hips, he was seconds away from grabbing her ass with both hands.

Max looked away, nauseated. After all this time, she'd forgotten how stomach-turning Mike and El could be, with their heart eyes and their yearning glances and their *enthusiastic* physical affection. After two years of separation, the horny teens were picking up right where they left off, like not a day had passed. Max groaned. She loved El, but she wasn't sure how much hormone-crazed shmoopiness she could take.

Max noticed Will standing next to her, looking equally nauseous.

"I bet you didn't miss this," she joked.

Will shrugged uncomfortably. "It's... it's romantic." He relaxed as Mike and El broke their kiss, then stiffened when he realized they were just catching their breath. In a moment they were back at it.

Max shook her head. "Nothing like watching your sister make out with your best friend, right?"

"Nothing like it," Will said weakly.

Max turned away but couldn't help watching the couple from the corner of her eye. They were an odd pair. Objectively El was way out of Mike's league, what with being a superhero, not to mention exceptionally pretty. But Wheeler had a strange, awkward charm shining out from under all that dorkiness. He was undeniably smart, and in a certain light there was something handsome in the sharp planes and angles of his face. If he put on a few pounds, and dressed better, he might even be a catch.

Regardless, it seemed that Mike and El were soulmates, or something like that. According to Lucas, the two had fallen in love the moment they met, in the middle of the night in the pouring rain, when they were just twelve years old. Max didn't know about that. She hadn't been there. But Max *had* been there two years ago, when El's love brought Mike back from the dead. You couldn't deny they had some kind of connection.

Was it soulmates? Was it forever until they died? Who knew? Max

wondered if even soulmates got tired of each other. People could be great together for a long time, have this amazing relationship filled with love, and then one day...

Her eyes shifted to Lucas. He glanced at her and she looked away.

Mike and El kept swapping spit like no one else was in the room. Max sighed. She wondered if she could sneak outside tonight and boost a car after everyone went to sleep. She hadn't seen much security on the way in. Dr. Owens was probably trying to keep a low profile for his super-secret project.

If Max drove hard, she could be home in two days. Of course, then she'd be back in Hawkins. With her mom. And Neil.

Goddammit.

The soldiers in the room shifted awkwardly as Mike and El's kiss stretched on and on. Will shuffled his feet. Lucas coughed.

Enough was enough. Max tapped Mike on the shoulder. "Okay you two, maybe you should save some of that for later."

The couple broke the kiss, blushing and whispering endearments as they separated. Max wrapped El in a hug and something about the girl's warmth was pure relief. Things were good then, all reunions and happiness. Mike hugged Will, and Steve hugged El - now *that* was interesting - and good friends separated for two long years got reacquainted.

Then a handsome young man walked into the room and Max thought the whole trip might be worthwhile.

He was gorgeous. *Gorgeous*. Movie stars should look so good. His name was Ewan and he was a friend of El's and he was the best looking guy Max had ever seen in real life, up to and including Steve Harrington.

The handsome boy draped an arm over El's shoulders. He had this casual physicality with her, standing close, nudging her, his hip pressed against hers. El ate it up with a spoon. She smiled and giggled, eyes shining as she introduced the boy, eager for her friends to like him.

Wheeler looked ready to chew glass.

Max looked back and forth between the two boys. Ewan smiled but there was ice in his eyes when he looked at Mike. His casual grip on El's shoulder seemed *possessive*.

Max suddenly wondered if El had more than one reason for putting on those ass pants.

She was turning that thought over in her mind when Ewan smiled at her. He introduced himself and Max's thoughts dissolved and her mind went to pieces. She felt naked under Ewan's startling blue eyes and a blush burned across her skin as she linked the words 'Ewan' and 'naked'.

The boy had a smile that made her feel like the only person in the room. Her gaze roamed over him. You couldn't miss the way his muscles stretched his shirt when he moved. He didn't have the gross, bloated form of a bodybuilder, but the firm physique of an athlete. It was the kind of body you wanted to run your tongue over and nip with your teeth.

Max stammered as she introduced herself. She wanted to be cool and sophisticated, but Ewan was so pretty she couldn't make her mouth work. She was surprised to hear herself giggling, and she *never* giggled. She felt like a fool.

Then she realized her boyfriend was staring at her in disbelief and she *really* felt like a fool.

She scrambled to salvage the situation. Waving a hand in her boyfriend's direction, she said, "Ewan, I'd like you to meet—"

Her voice died away.

She couldn't remember her boyfriend's name.

Good lord, she'd been dating the guy for almost four years and *she couldn't remember his name*.

"Lucas," her boyfriend said, and of course his name was Lucas. Max couldn't believe she'd forgotten. It was like her brain had shut down,

transfixed by this pretty man.

Lucas shook Ewan's hand, scowling.

The handsome young man continued around the group, introducing himself with that brilliant smile. Max looked around nervously, wondering if the others had noticed her meltdown. Apparently not. Mike was too busy glaring at Ewan and boiling with barely contained rage. Dustin was distracted too, confusion on his face as he looked from Dart to Steve to Will and then back to Dart again.

Then there was El, dear innocent El, completely oblivious to the tension bubbling in the room. She beamed at her old friends from Hawkins and her boyfriend and the handsome young man who stood so close to her.

* * *

The VLA Observatory

San Agustin Plains, New Mexico

Sunday, April 24, 1988

It was a relief when Dr. Owens joined them. Between Mike's glares and Lucas' scowls and Dustin's moping, the conversation in the room had been painfully awkward. El and Will didn't say much at the best of times, and Max found herself having to fill the silence. It wasn't her natural role. The fact that Lucas gave her the stink eye every time she said something to Ewan didn't help.

So when Owens strolled in, radiating his trademark aura of easy calm, it was a welcome respite. The portly old scientist usually brought nothing but trouble, but Max would take what she could get. Things so far had been about as pleasant as a root canal.

Lieutenant Remo joined them as well, and as usual Max couldn't help staring at the soldier. He looked just like the actor Michael Biehn,

star of *Aliens* and *The Terminator*. The resemblance was extraordinary - Remo had Biehn's piercing blue eyes, strong jaw and wiry cords of muscle. The two could have been carbon copies. Remo caught her looking and Max jerked her eyes to the floor. She knew the man was sensitive about the resemblance, though Max thought there must be worse things than looking like a Hollywood action hero.

She sighed. Honestly, between Remo and Harrington and Ewan, there was so much eye candy at this observatory that she didn't know how El managed to concentrate. If Max spent her days surrounded by all these handsome men, she'd hump her pillow so much it would leave a rash.

"Well, it's good to see everybody!" Dr. Owens announced. "Did you all have a nice trip? Have some lemonade!" He set a tray with a pitcher and glasses on the card table in the middle of the room.

Something about his light-hearted tone rubbed Max the wrong way.

"Nice trip?" she snapped. "You grabbed us in the middle of the night, threw us on a cargo plane, then drove us across the desert to the middle of nowhere! It's not exactly a vacation!"

"But the desert's so pretty, Max," said Owens.

"Pretty?" she sputtered.

"And travel broadens the mind."

"It doesn't when you're running from a demogorgon!"

"Demogorgon?" said El.

Owens' cheerful facade dropped instantly. He turned serious eyes to Harrington. "It found you?"

"There were three of them," Steve said grimly. "We got away, but it was close."

"Three!" gasped El.

Owens nodded. "Good job. I had a feeling that—"He stopped

abruptly when he realized El was staring at him.

“What do you mean, *it found you?*” she said. Her voice was dangerously low. “Did you know something about this?”

Owens held up a calming hand. “Now, El—”

“Take it easy,” said Steve. “Dr. Owens only thought there was one, El. I mean really, who would have guessed the Upside Down would send three of those things after Mike?”

“*After Mike!*” El’s shriek was deafening. She glared at Owens. The card table and the chairs around it started to tremble. The glasses shook on the tray, clinking.

“Easy, El,” Owens said, looking worried. Remo looked uncertainly between the girl and the scientist.

“You knew the Upside Down was after Mike and you didn’t tell me?” El hissed. The tray lifted off the table. A chair tipped over.

“Now El, I didn’t know for sure,” said Owens, waving his hands defensively. “It was just a hunch. I didn’t want to worry you.”

“El, seriously,” Steve said, looking rather worried himself.

Max could only watch, frozen. Now that El’s powers were back, the girl could do some real damage if she had a mind to. Things could get ugly if she didn’t calm down.

Ewan laid a hand on her shoulder. “El,” he said gently.

The chairs stopped shaking and the tray sank back down on the table.

“You should have told me,” El said, her voice still angry but more controlled.

“I wasn’t sure,” Owens said cautiously. “No sense in worrying you over nothing, right? We heard some things in the latest transmissions from the Oort Cloud and I warned Harrington, just in case. But it was only a hunch.”

El didn't say anything but eventually she nodded. A trickle of blood dripped from her nose and she quickly wiped it away.

Max blinked in surprise. She thought El's nosebleeds were gone. When the girl brought Mike back from the dead, she'd discovered a safer way to use her powers. What the hell was going on here?

Dustin leaned close to Lucas. "Did he just say *Oort Cloud*?"

The dark-skinned boy shrugged, looking utterly confused.

Well, that makes two of us, Max thought.

"So, I'm glad that's all sorted," Owens smiled, his jovial air returning like he'd slipped on a mask. "Let's have some lemonade!"

The tension eased as they took their glasses. Max thought the lemonade was too sweet, but it was welcome anyway after the desert heat.

They said their hellos to Dr. Owens and Remo. Mike stopped glaring at Ewan long enough to ask, "Why is the Upside Down after me?"

Owens sighed. "I don't know, kid. I wish I did."

"Are you sure it's Mike they're after?" asked Dustin. "I mean, not the rest of us?"

"I think so. Based on our translation, the Upside Down were talking about someone they call *the Adversary's Mate*. We're pretty sure they mean Mike."

Wheeler looked confused. "*The Adversary's Mate*? How is that me?"

It was Will who spoke. "*The Adversary* is the Upside Down's name for El. And you're El's, um..."

"Oh!" Mike said, blushing. He shot a quick glance at El, who was blushing too, but smiling fondly at him all the same.

Now it was Ewan's turn to scowl. He hid it well, but it was there if you were looking for it. Max supposed that Ewan's good looks usually

got him any girl he wanted. Seeing El with a skinny nerd like Wheeler had to be irritating as hell.

“Wait a minute, I don’t get any of this,” Lucas interjected. “What are you talking about? Transmissions, translations, the Oort Cloud? What in the world’s going on here?”

Max had been wondering the same thing. She and Lucas might not be soulmates, but their thoughts usually went in tandem. They were a good match.

They used to be, anyway.

“And why did you bring us here?” Mike added. “Was it just to protect me? Why did you bring everyone else along? I mean, not that I’m complaining about being here with *my girlfriend*.” He put a lot of stress on the last two words and took El’s hand in his own.

El gazed at him adoringly. Her smile lit the room.

Ewan’s scowl deepened. You didn’t have to be looking for it now.

Owens grinned at Remo. “Didn’t I say they were smart kids? They always ask the right questions.” He turned his smile on Mike and Lucas. “You guys always ask the right questions. They’re good questions. And you’ll get good answers, I promise – tonight.”

“I think we’ll take those answers right now,” said Mike.

Max had to hand it to Wheeler – he might be a dork, but he had a pair of big brass ones. He wasn’t afraid of confrontation, not even with a powerful government operative masquerading as an affable old scientist.

Owens didn’t lose his smile. “Unfortunately, despite the lemonade, this isn’t a social call. It’s good to see all of you – really it is – but I’m here for El, Will and Ewan. We’ve got some work to do.”

“Dr. Owens...” Will began.

“They just got here,” El whined.

"I know, young lady, and I'm sorry. But you'll have plenty of time to catch up with your friends later. Right now, we've got a good window on the Cloud and we need to take advantage."

El looked ready to protest again but Owens cut her off. "You want to find out why these things are after Mike, don't you? Then let's take a few hours to see what we can find out. Then you can see young Mr. Wheeler here and everybody else for as long as you want."

El pouted but finally sighed, defeated.

She turned sad eyes to Mike and laid a delicate hand on his arm. "I'm sorry. But I'll see you tonight. I promise."

His lips quirked in a smile. "It's been ten months. I guess a few more hours won't hurt. But... it's really good to see you, El. I missed you."

"I missed you, Mike," she breathed. She took a step toward him, no doubt ready for another tongue-tangling kiss, but Ewan stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"Come on, El," the young man said. "We should go while the window is still open. After all, we wouldn't want anything *tragic* to happen to Mike, would we?"

Wheeler glared and Ewan sneered at the lanky boy over El's head.

Well, Max thought. Maybe this will be more interesting than Hawkins after all.

* * *

Corporal Lineker escorted them to their rooms. He was one of Remo's best soldiers, a big man with hair so blonde it was almost white. He had pale Irish skin, the kind that never tanned. Max could sympathize. Whenever she tried to catch a few rays, all she got was a burn and more freckles.

Lineker was a gruff, taciturn man, but he knew the Party from their adventures in Maine two years before. That seemed to be enough to break through his usual stony silence. He grunted a comment now and then as he led them through the halls. It was like getting a tour of the Death Star from Darth Vader, but it was better than nothing.

It was especially welcome given all of Max's friends were being pissy little bitches and not saying a word. Wheeler was seething, Dustin was moping, and Lucas was giving her the silent treatment because of Ewan.

Which was completely unfair. It wasn't Max's fault the guy was so good looking. Besides, didn't Lucas turn into a drooling brain donor every time the waitress with the big tits served them at Benny's? If Max window-shopped a handsome guy now and then, that just made them even.

As they walked the halls, Max came to the conclusion that the Project was surprisingly... dull. She'd expected something out of *Star Trek*, but it was all institutional government blandness. There was linoleum tile and fluorescent lighting and long hallways. There was one interchangeable office after another. The people they passed in the halls didn't have much to distinguish them – they were mostly soldiers in standard-issue fatigues and scientists in white lab coats. Now and then, Max peeked into a conference room and saw bureaucrats in grey suits talking about budgets and paperwork.

Apparently the government could make anything boring, even a super-secret project in the middle of the desert.

That made it all the more jarring when Max looked down one hallway and saw a pair of gleaming steel doors at the end. The doors were three times the height of a man and guarded by a squad of commandos who seemed to have graduate degrees in Looking Dangerous.

“What's that?” she asked, pointing.

Lineker grunted. “That's where the magic happens. All the high-tech stuff the Doc does to snoop on the Oort Cloud happens in there. You need special clearance just to get near it.”

Dustin was intrigued enough to come out of his mope. "What exactly is he doing with the Oort Cloud?"

"Not for me to say, kid."

Dustin huffed. "You sound just like Steve."

They continued past a large, glass-walled room filled with computer banks and rows of monitors. Technicians clacked away at keyboards. As Max watched, a tech got up from his desk and carried a floppy disk across the room, where a cabinet was guarded by two bored soldiers. At a gesture from the tech, one of the soldiers unlocked the cabinet while the other opened a logbook and made a notation. The tech put the disk in the cabinet and signed the book. The soldiers locked the cabinet again as the tech left the room.

"This is where they code all the Project software," Lineker grunted before Max could ask. "The Doc calls it the secret weapon. It's kept under heavy security. You don't want those disks walking out of here."

"What's on them?" Dustin asked. "Or is that not for you to say?"

The corner of Lineker's mouth turned up a fraction, the closest the man ever got to a smile. "You're catching on, kid."

They turned into another hall, no different than the ones they'd walked before. A door opened at the far end and a large man stepped from one of the offices. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but Max swore he looked just like Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Mike jerked to a halt. "Grigori!" he hissed.

The man looked up at the sound. He smiled faintly, then crossed into another hallway and vanished from sight.

"It couldn't be him," said Dustin. "What would a Russian be doing here?"

"You'd be surprised," Lineker rumbled.

"What do you mean?"

Lineker scrubbed a hand through his bristly hair. “Have you ever heard that ancient Chinese curse, ‘May you live in interesting times’? Well, I guess we’re pretty cursed around here.”

* * *

They’d been assigned a suite in the dormitory section. There was a shared common area with a kitchen and a living room and four adjoining bedrooms. As with everything at the Project, the space was bland but functional.

“I’ll have your stuff delivered once it gets here,” Lineker grunted. “Dinner’s at seven.” He left without another word and closed the door behind him.

For a moment the Party stared at each other in silence.

Max’s mind raced with everything she’d seen. A special room sealed behind steel doors. Heavily guarded computer disks. On top of it all, the Soviets – America’s great enemy in the Cold War – were roaming the site.

Two years ago, Colonel Grigori Denisov tried to kidnap Mike as part of a plot led by El’s sinister ‘*Papa*’, Martin Brenner. The last time anyone had seen Grigori, he’d been trapped under a pile of rubble in the catacombs beneath Whateley House, bleeding from a gunshot wound in his foot. Now, not only was he free and alive, he was apparently Dr. Owens’ ally. The implications were staggering.

Max saw the emotions race across Lucas’ face as he processed this new information. She knew he must be shocked. From the tension in his frame, he was going to explode in three, two, one...

“What the hell is up with that Ewan guy?” he shouted.

Okay, Max thought. Sure. Communists were operating on American soil but let’s focus on the pretty boy.

"Tell me about it," Mike snarled. "Did you see the way he was pawing El?"

Great. Wheeler also wanted to ignore the Soviets in favor of some relationship drama. Was Max the only person who wanted to talk about a *real* issue?

"I swear," Mike continued, "if he touches her one more time, I'll... I'll break his arm!"

The idea was so ludicrous, Max had to snort. "Oh please, Wheeler, he'd kick your ass."

Lucas rounded on her. "What, you're sticking up for that guy?"

She instantly realized her mistake, but it was too late now. She'd have to brazen it out. "I'm not *sticking up for him*. I'm just stating a fact, which is that he could pound Wheeler with one hand tied behind his back."

"You're sticking up for him!" Lucas shouted. Mike sputtered in fury.

"What the hell's gotten into you?" Max snapped at her boyfriend. Seriously, there were commies in the hallways and they were talking about *this*?

"What the hell's gotten into *me*?" Lucas raged. "What the hell's gotten into *you*?" He fluttered his eyes and simpered. "Oh, Ewan, you're so handsome. I'm going to giggle and flirt right in front of my boyfriend."

"Are you serious?" Max gasped. "I wasn't flirting!"

"I'm surprised you didn't ask him out right there!"

"What the hell, are you having your period or something, Lucas? Don't be so hysterical. I was just being friendly."

"Friendly? You forgot my name!"

Now that was true, and embarrassing, but hell if Max would admit it. "I-I was tired! It's been a long day and I barely got any

sleep. Besides, it's clearly El that he's after!"

Wheeler turned ghost white. "So you think so too?"

Dustin had been watching the exchange with worry on his face. "Guys, we don't know that. Maybe he was being friendly? I mean, some people are just more... physical."

"No," Mike said. "That wasn't friendly. That was - that was..." He couldn't get the words out.

"Well, that creep needs to stay away from other people's girlfriends," Lucas snarled.

Now it was Max's turn to get angry. "Hey, we don't *belong* to you! You don't *control* us! If El and I want to be friends with other guys, we have every right!"

"Oh sure," Lucas sneered, "you and El just want to be *friends* with the guy."

"Wait a minute," Mike said, his anger rising, "what did you just say? Trust me, El doesn't want anything to do with that guy! I mean, we're in love! We're not like y—"

He stopped abruptly.

Max and Lucas froze. There was silence again. Max turned to Mike.

"Go on, Wheeler," she said coldly. "Finish your sentence. You're not like what?"

"We're not like..." Mike shook his head. "You know what, forget it."

"No Mike, come on," Lucas demanded. "Not like what?"

"Not like... other couples," Mike said at last. Then his anger flared again. "And what are you doing acting all pissed? You're the one who just said El is interested in this guy. Where do you get off?"

"Guys," said Dustin, but they ignored him.

"He also said *I'm* interested in the guy," Max growled. She turned on her boyfriend. "Wheeler's right, where do you get off saying shit like that?"

Lucas was bewildered, finding himself the target of a two-on-one. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Guys," Dustin said again.

"Yeah?" Max snapped. "How did you mean it?"

"Well..." Lucas' eyes narrowed and he went back on the attack. "I meant that when a girl *just wants to be friends with a guy*, she shouldn't fawn all over him! And that goes for you and that goes for El! I know we don't own you, I know we don't control you, but it's just good manners not to flirt with other guys *in front of your boyfriends!*"

"Guys!" Dustin screamed. "Would you shut up!"

They all froze, shocked by the gentle boy's outburst.

"Thanks," Dustin said quietly. "I'd really appreciate it if you'd stop arguing."

"Dustin—" Mike began but the curly-haired boy held up a hand.

"Mike, Lucas, Max... you guys are friends. There's a lot of stuff going on right now and I really need you to stay friends."

"Dustin..." said Max and then she sighed. "Sorry."

"Yeah," Lucas muttered. Mike nodded.

Dustin smiled sadly. "Thanks. It's just— it can be hard to stay friends. Harder than you think. So you really need to try."

** *

Dinner was served in a large conference room. El, Will and Steve were

there. So were Owens and Remo.

So was Ewan.

The decor was spartan but the food was good: tamales, enchiladas and carne asada smothered in sauce. There were fresh-made tortillas, chips and salsa, guacamole. Coming from California, Max was familiar with southwestern food, but it was new to the rest of the Hawkins gang. They were hesitant at first but soon ate with gusto.

"This is really good," Dustin said as he built another fajita. Max had to agree.

Her eyes roamed the table. Off to her right, Mike sat beside El. The two talked softly, close and affectionate, but Mike occasionally laid a possessive hand on her leg and glared at Ewan. El beamed every time Mike touched her, oblivious to the fact that her boyfriend was behaving like a rutting stag.

Ewan matched Mike glare for glare and retaliated with in-jokes that kept El giggling while her friends stared blankly. The muscles tightened in Mike's jaw every time El laughed.

Max sat between Lucas and Will, which meant she ate mostly in silence. Will was naturally quiet – he was friendly, but you needed to draw him out of his shell – and Lucas was busy scowling at Ewan. It didn't exactly make for a scintillating evening.

Enough is enough, she decided. She turned to Dr. Owens. "Okay, Doc. Time to fess up."

"I'm sorry?" Owens said.

"You promised you'd tell us tonight why you brought us here. Well, it's tonight. Start talking."

Owens exchanged glances with Remo. Then the grey-haired scientist nodded. "Fair enough. You deserve answers. So... let's start with the observatory. As you probably guessed, this is a place where we spy on the creatures of the Upside Down."

"I knew it," Mike muttered.

“It’s not aliens?” Dustin asked, disappointed.

Owens held up a cautioning finger. “That’s not what I said.”

Dustin looked confused. Max was glad it wasn’t just her.

Lucas cleared his throat. “Let me get this straight – you’re using these telescopes to see into the Upside Down? You can spy on another dimension?”

“Not exactly. We’re not spying on the Upside Down. We’re spying on *the creatures* of the Upside Down. You have to understand, the thing that you call the Upside Down isn’t another dimension. It’s the future.”

Silence settled over the conference room.

“Uh... could you repeat that?” Max finally said.

“It’s kind of freaky, right?” Owens said. “Hard to wrap your head around. But the fact is, most of the Gates we’ve encountered – including the ones in Hawkins and in Maine – aren’t portals to another world. They’re portals to *this* world, but in the future. After it was invaded. After it was... conquered.”

“Conquered,” Dustin whispered.

“Right. At some point in the future, our world is going to be conquered by the creature you call the Mind Flayer. He and his minions – the demogorgons and the demodogs – are going to invade, take over our planet and wipe out humanity.”

Max’s stomach sank to somewhere around her feet. She wasn’t sure what was more appalling – that Owens was talking about the Apocalypse or that he was doing it so casually.

“Well that doesn’t sound good,” said Lucas. He was a master of understatement sometimes.

Mike tapped the table, thinking. “Will, does this sound right to you? I mean, you’ve *been* to the Upside Down.”

Will nodded. The small boy's voice was hesitant as he dredged up experiences no one would want to remember, but he forced the words out. "I think so, Mike. When I was... taken... and hiding in the Upside Down, it was a lot like our world. There were houses and cars and buildings that matched ours, only... twisted. I thought it was a mirror dimension, you know, like in *Star Trek*? But it could have been our world, too, after it was conquered – just like Dr. Owens said."

Lucas was turning it all over in his mind. "So when we fought the Kraken and those demogorgons two years ago... we were fighting time travelers?"

Dr. Owens nodded. "Now you're getting it. The creatures from the Upside Down have been travelling back in time through the Gates, trying to prepare our world for their invasion."

"Wait a minute," said Mike. "You said *most* of the gates you've encountered are portals through time. You didn't say all of them."

"I knew you'd pick up on that, Mike. That's right. Some of the Gates travel through space, not time. And at some point, the Mind Flayer and his minions are going to open a portal in space that lets them travel from their world to ours."

"So they can do the invasion that creates the Upside Down!" Dustin gasped.

"Bingo."

"But if the Upside Down is our world in the future," Max said, her mind spinning from all the talk of Gates and invasions and space-time, "then where does the Mind Flayer come from? Where is his original world?"

Lucas snapped his fingers. "The Oort Cloud!"

Max rubbed her eyes. "Seriously, what the hell is an Oort Cloud?"

Owens was grinning. "I swear, you kids really are smart. You're exactly right, Lucas. The Mind Flayer and his minions are inhabitants of the Oort Cloud – a ring of small, icy planetoids at the very edge of our solar system."

Max considered that.Icy planetoids.Edge of the solar system.Well, that would explain why the Mind Flayer liked it cold.“Why do they call it the Oort Cloud?”

“The Dutch astronomer Jan Oort first hypothesized it back in the 50s,” Mike told her.“And it’s a ‘cloud’ because it’s this nebulous mass of small ice worlds and debris.The theory is that it’s the source of things like Halley’s Comet.”

Max should have guessed Wheeler would know that.The guy read science magazines for *fun*.

El laid her hand on Mike’s knee.The girl was practically glowing at her boyfriend’s display of intellectual prowess.“Mike,” she murmured, her voice low and husky.Wheeler blushed and El’s lips quirked in the faintest ghost of a smile.

Max could hear Ewan grinding his teeth from across the table.

“So, okay,” Dustin said, “there’s going to be this big invasion where the Mind Flayer conquers the world.He and all his demogorgons use a Gate to cross to Earth from the Oort Cloud.When does all this happen?”

Owens and Remo exchanged glances and, oddly, looked at Steve as well.Finally, Owens said, “Based on information that’s recently come into our possession, the invasion will happen when Aldebaran is in the House of Aries.”

Max stared at Owens, bewildered.She turned to Wheeler but he looked equally baffled.

“Uh... when is that?” Lucas asked.

Dr. Owens shrugged.“I couldn’t tell you the exact day, but we checked with some astrologers and apparently Aldebaran will be in the House of Aries in May of 1988.”

“That’s next month!” Max gasped.

“You’re quick, Miss Mayfield.So I think you’ll understand when I tell you we need to find out where that Gate is going to open.We need to

stop that invasion before it gets started.”

Silence blanketed the conference room again.

“How are we going to do that?” Lucas finally asked.

There was none of the usual levity in Owens’ voice. “Based on what we know, the Mind Flayer is going to lead the way. He’ll come into our world through the Gate to make the final connection – physically this time, not through agents like the Kraken. We need to be there when he arrives. And we need to kill him.”

* * *

Owens said it casually, like he was talking about taking out the garbage. It was like the guy had forgotten everything that had happened in the last four years.

“How in the world are we supposed to kill the Mind Flayer?” Max demanded. “We barely survived the Kraken and that was made out of dead fish!”

Around the table, eyes shifted to El.

“No!” Mike shouted, rising out of his seat. “You’re not going to put this on El again!”

“Mike’s right,” Owens said. “El is very powerful, but even she can’t beat the Mind Flayer on her own. No, we’re going to need an edge.”

Max’s mind raced. “What about the Spear of Destiny? I mean, it killed the Kraken, right? Why don’t we use it against the Mind Flayer?”

“I thought it was lost,” said Lucas.

“It is,” Remo told him. “We dragged the harbor at Shingleford Strand a dozen times and never found it. The Spear is gone.”

Steve stroked his chin thoughtfully. “How about the Blade of Achilles?”

El looked puzzled. “I thought that only worked on zombies.”

Max blinked in surprised. *Blade of Achilles? Zombies?* What the hell was this?

Owens rolled his eyes and when he spoke there was deep frustration in his voice. “For the last time, those weren't zombies! They were humans infected with a retrovirus that gave them a cadaverous appearance, enhanced strength and resistance to physical damage. That's all! It wasn't the walking dead! It was a virus!”

El looked at Steve, confused. The older boy nodded reassuringly and mouthed *Zombies* at her.

“At any rate,” Remo said, “El's right. We've got no reason to think the Blade would work on the Mind Flayer. Even if it did, the CIA's got it right now. They requisitioned it for an op they're running in Peru, way up in the Andes. There's no way to get our hands on it.”

“CIA?” Steve said. “Are you telling me *Jack McAllister* has the Blade?”

El frowned. “That douchebag!”

Max stared at the girl in shock. So did everyone else.

“What?” El asked, surprised. “That's what Steve calls him.”

“Thanks, El,” Steve sighed.

Remo raised an eyebrow. “Calling a fellow operator a douchebag? That's not very professional, Harrington.”

“Sorry, sir.”

Remo grinned. “I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm just saying it's not very professional.”

“Yes, sir,” Steve said, fighting down a smile.

“At any rate,” Dr. Owens said, “the point is, the Spear of Destiny is gone and the Blade of Achilles only works on zo— on retrovirus victims. So if we’re going to kill the Mind Flayer, we’re going to need something else. And that’s where you kids come in.”

He looked at each of them in turn. “Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Max... you’re here because I need your help. I need you to help me find a sword – a very special sword.”

“We’re not going to like this, are we?” Dustin muttered.

Owens smiled. “Probably not. You see, kids, I need you to help me find Excalibur.”

5. The Sword

Notes for the Chapter:

What the heck. How about another chapter?

The VLA Observatory
San Agustin Plains, New Mexico
Sunday, April 24, 1988

There was quiet in the conference room after Dr. Owens broke the news. El looked from face to face, wondering what her friends were thinking. She used to know them so well, but after two years, she didn't know what to expect.

"Excalibur?" Mike said. "The legendary sword of King Arthur? That Excalibur?"

El felt a warm current of pride ripple through her chest. Mike was so smart. Of course he would know about Excalibur. Not like her - she'd stared blankly when Owens told her about the weapon a few days ago. It had taken the old scientist hours to explain its history and legends, and she still wasn't sure she understood it.

"The very same," Owens smiled.

"But Excalibur is a myth," Dustin protested. "It's... it's a made-up weapon out of old French romances."

"And Disney movies," Lucas snorted.

Oh. So Lucas and Dustin knew about Excalibur too. Now El was starting to feel a little stupid. Well, not stupid, but... ignorant. It was frustrating how much she'd missed growing up in the Lab. Sure, because of the Lab she could throw cars around with her mind, but right now it didn't seem like a great trade.

"Not necessarily," said Mike, watching Owens with appraising eyes. "The old French romances and the story cycles like *Le Morte d'Arthur* have their origins in even older Welsh legends. Some historians think those legends have a basis in fact."

El felt the warmth ripple through her again. She couldn't help putting a hand to her chest. Goodness, she was starting to feel a bit light-headed. She wondered if her face was flushed.

She couldn't help it though. There was something about the intelligence in Mike's eyes, the way he seemed to know pretty much everything. It made a girl... feel things.

Owens' smile broadened. "You're exactly right, Mr. Wheeler. Just because something gets turned into a Disney movie doesn't mean it's fake."

Max nodded. "Like the Spear of Destiny. I mean, is it really the spear that stabbed Jesus on the Cross? Who knows? It still killed the Kraken."

"A lot of old legends have a kernel of truth," Mike agreed, not taking his eyes from Dr. Owens. "So you're saying there's another weapon out there like the Spear? A transdimensional energy matrix that destroys creatures from the Upside Down? That seems a little... unlikely."

The old scientist turned to Lieutenant Remo. "You know, it's funny. Two years ago, these kids kept telling us about a magic spear and trying to convince us it was real. Now we're on board and they're the suspicious ones. It's like they stopped drinking their own Koolaid."

"Roger that," said Remo.

"We're not saying these things don't exist," Dustin interjected. "But how many could there be? And... *Excalibur*? Come on."

"I admit it sounds unlikely," Owens acknowledged. "Maybe this is all just a wild goose chase. But based on the source, we think it could be the real deal."

"Who's the source?" asked Lucas.

"Not who," said Owens. "What."

He reached into a satchel beside his chair and pulled out a slim

book. It was old, hand-stitched, with covers of worn brown leather. There was a design inked on the front - a draftsman's compass over a builder's square, and in between them, a large letter G.

El knew that G stood for God, the Great Architect of the Universe.

"Oh shit," Dustin whispered.

Mike took a deep breath and ran a hand through his thick mop of hair.

"The Freemasons," he said.

Owens nodded, not smiling now. "The Freemasons."

* * *

Mike ran his fingers over the old, cracked parchment. Owens' book was a journal, the entries written in black and red ink with a spidery hand. Mike's eyes flicked over places and dates. *Port Royal, August 1681. Cartagena, April 1682. The Yucatan, June 1683.*

Each entry brought the anonymous author closer and closer to his final revelation. It was a prophecy of doom and despair.

The end of the world.

There were mystic symbols on the pages. Mike recognized them: the twin pillars Boaz and Jachin; the All-Seeing Eye; the Great Temple of Jerusalem. With those symbols, the journal's writer claimed to inherit the wisdom of Hiram Abiff, the magician, the visionary architect of King Solomon.

"Come on, you're shitting me," said Mike.

"I shit you not," Owens answered. "We analyzed the paper, kid. It's three hundred years old if it's a day."

“So the paper’s old,” said Lucas. “That doesn’t prove anything. Did you ever hear of the Gospel of Thomas? In the 1950’s, a forger found some old parchment in a university storeroom and used it to write a ‘lost book of the Bible.’ He sold it for millions. The paper was old, but the whole thing was a hoax.”

“I get it, you’re skeptical,” Owens smiled. “But we tested the ink too. It dates from the same period. This may be a hoax, Mr. Sinclair – but if it is, it’s a hoax that’s three hundred years old.”

“Okay, let’s say the journal really is that old,” countered Dustin. “What would *the Freemasons* be doing in Central America in the 1680s?”

“It’s not so crazy,” Steve broke in. “When you think about it, why *wouldn’t* the Freemasons be in Central America? There were colonies in the Caribbean by then. Mostly Spanish but also Dutch, English and French. Don’t forget, that was the golden age of piracy, when Blackbeard and Captain Kidd roamed the Spanish Main.”

A startled silence fell over the room. All eyes turned to the young soldier.

Steve crossed his arms defensively over his chest. “What? The pretty boy can’t read a book now and then?”

El laid a sympathetic hand on his arm.

After a moment, Mike cleared his throat. “No, um... it’s a good point, Steve. Sure. We know that Freemasons were with the colonists in New England. Why not the Caribbean too?” He tapped the book thoughtfully. “Which means it’s possible this thing is genuine.”

“Right,” said Lucas. “A genuine three-hundred-year-old hoax. Come on, an invasion of demons is going to destroy the world? That’s a little far-fetched.”

Owens raised an eyebrow. “Two years ago, you guys killed a giant fish monster with a magic spear. I’d say far-fetched is kind of your specialty.”

Then Dustin said something and Max said something and the

discussion carried on. Mike ignored it. He stared at the book, thinking.

He'd only had time to skim the journal, but he still recognized something *consistent* in the Freemason's story. The man's antiquated language was hard to decipher, and by the end of the journal he was clearly insane, but Mike had no doubt.

This was a man who'd met the Upside Down.

In the pages of the journal, the Freemason claimed he'd encountered demons in the dark Caribbean night. He described towering creatures, things with no faces and five-jawed mouths filled with teeth. The man tracked the monsters from colony to colony, port to port, following their trail through sweltering grasslands and steaming jungles.

At last, in the rainforests of the Yucatan, he discovered a portal to Hell. It was a place like our own world but eternally dark. Its silent streets were filled with the rusted shells of metal beasts and great ruined buildings that stretched to the sky.

As the demons hunted and killed across the Caribbean, the Freemason sent word to his colleagues in London and Paris. His fellow Masons sent ancient weapons of magic across the Atlantic, chief among them the legendary blade Excalibur. An expedition was formed to go through the portal and bring the battle to Hell itself.

On the other side, in the dark world, they met Satan. He was a monstrous thing, like a great spider, and he reached into their minds and took over their bodies. The master of Hell possessed the expedition, one by one, and they all perished.

All but the journal's author. With the power of Excalibur, the Freemason broke Satan's hold over his mind, wounded the fallen angel, and escaped back to our world. He closed the portal behind him. The colonies – and the world – were saved.

But the Freemason was in despair. In the brief time Satan possessed him, he understood the creature's plan. The excursion into our world was just a vanguard, paving the way for Hell's invasion three hundred years in the future. When the time was right, the demons would come in an unstoppable flood and they would conquer the

Earth.

The end of the world would happen when Aldebaran was in the house of Aries.

In other words, in May 1988..Just a few days away.

Mike sighed.The Freemason's story just *fit*.It didn't matter if you called the creatures 'demons' or 'demogorgons,' they were easy to recognize.And the portal to Hell was clearly a gate to the Upside Down.

As for being possessed by Satan... update the language to modern English and change Satan to the Mind Flayer, and Will could have written that part.

And if all that was real, couldn't Excalibur be real, too?

The debate in the room grew more heated.Voices started to break through Mike's concentration.He heard Max and Lucas, arguing the book was a hoax or some colonial nutter's fever dream.He heard Dustin, cautiously open to possibilities.He heard the frustrated edge creeping into Dr. Owens' voice.And he heard Ewan.

Ewan.

He didn't even hear what the boy said, just his voice.It was so *grating*.There was something *nasally* about it, the ghost of a whine that made Mike grind his teeth.

He couldn't tune it out.Ewan's voice slithered around in his head, making meaningless *wah-wah* sounds like the teacher in the Charlie Brown cartoons.Then Mike heard El say, "I think Ewan's right."

Mike didn't know what she was agreeing with.He just knew she was agreeing with *him*.

A red mist filled his vision.Ewan's nasally whine turned into a clanging bell in his ears.

I think Ewan's right.

Mike shot to his feet. He slammed his hand down on the book and the bang silenced the whole room. El looked at him, startled.

The silence stretched and Mike stood there, hand on the book, staring at his friends. They stared back at him.

Lucas coughed. "You wanted to say something, Mike?"

No, Mike realized in horror. He didn't. He had absolutely no idea what he was doing.

All he knew was that Ewan had said something and El had agreed and Mike wanted all of that to *stop*.

Now he was standing here in front of all his friends, hand on the Freemason's book, not saying anything.

The silence was agonizing.

Okay, Wheeler, his brain said, you're making us look pretty stupid here. And I think you're freaking El out. So you better come up with something to salvage this.

You're my brain, Mike hissed. *You're the one who's supposed to come up with something!*

His brain groaned. *Fine. But don't say I never do anything for you.*

The pieces connected in Mike's head and everything became clear. He flipped to the end of the book with a deft twist of his fingers. He pointed at the two-page spread of symbols that concluded the volume. They were drawn in green and gold ink, nothing like the rest of the book.

Mike locked eyes with Dr. Owens. "You know this thing's not a hoax. So tell me about this."

Owens was quiet for a moment, regarding him with an expressionless face. Then the old scientist smiled. "No one puts anything past you, do they Mike? I was wondering when you'd get to that part."

Thank you, Mike told his brain.

Don't mention it, his brain said. I'm here if you need me. And seriously Mike, I know how much El means to you, but could you ease down on the testosterone? It'll be easier to make you look smart if you stop thinking with your johnson.

Mike wasn't sure how to respond to that. *Uh... I'll try.*

Which means no, his brain sighed. Great. This ought to be fun.

Mike blinked away his mental sidebar. "This is the only part of the book that matters," he said to Owens. "So tell me about it."

The scientist shrugged. "Okay, Mike. I think you get the general picture of what happened. The Freemason launched an expedition into the Upside Down and he was the only one who came back. *The sole survivor*. Thanks to Excalibur he was able to wound the... well, let's just call it the Mind Flayer, shall we? He wounded the Mind Flayer and shut the gate to our world."

"Right," said Mike. He was conscious that everyone was watching him and Dr. Owens. It felt like playing high stakes poker in front of an audience.

"So our Freemason comes back with two things," Owens continued. He counted them off on his fingers. "One, he comes back with Excalibur. Two, he comes back with a location – the launch point for the future invasion of Earth. So what do you think he did with them, Mike?"

Mike thought for a moment and then nodded. "He hid them. He hid them from anyone who might want to take the sword, or..."

"Or try to open the invasion gate early," Owens finished for him. "Exactly. So our Freemason travels the world. He hides Excalibur and the directions to the future gate. He records their hiding places in this journal. Then he sends the journal to the Freemasons in London and he tells them to keep it safe for three hundred years."

Mike looked at the symbols at the back of the journal again. There were sixty of them, thirty on each page of the two-page spread. They were square, boxy, all of a similar size and style. Looking at them

closer he could make out a skull, a man, and that one was...

"A jaguar," he gasped. "These are Mayan glyphs."

Owens laughed and slapped Remo on the shoulder. "Didn't I tell you? Didn't I say he's a sharp kid?" He turned back to Mike. "You're right, Mr. Wheeler, they're Mayan glyphs. So what do you think we should make of that?"

Owens's words were a challenge. Mike hesitated. From the corner of his eye he could see Ewan leaning forward, watching him carefully. Mike's eyes flicked to the glyphs, his mind making calculations.

"It's a code," he finally said. "If we want to find Excalibur, we need to break it."

Owens looked at Remo, then back to Mike. "Are you sure?" he asked. "You don't think it could be a message in Mayan that we need to translate?"

Mike stared at the symbols, his stomach sinking. Had he gotten it wrong? Lucas, Max and Dustin shifted uncertainly in their seats.

Mike couldn't bring himself to look at El. She had this amazing trust in him, this belief that he could think his way out of anything. He couldn't bear to see her disappointment if he screwed this up.

In for a dime, in for a dollar, he thought. *Trust yourself, Mike.*

"No," he said. "It couldn't be. The journal's author probably didn't know Mayan. I can't imagine his colleagues in London did. And he couldn't be sure *anyone* would know it in three hundred years. So he had to be using the glyphs as part of a code. Someone in the future was supposed to break it... or he gave the Freemasons in London the cipher."

Owens couldn't stop grinning. Ewan sat back in his chair, not quite hiding a look of disappointment. As for El...

Good lord. Her eyes bored into Mike and they were so wide and bright they practically *glowed*. If she kept looking at him like that, he

was going to pitch a tent in his trousers big enough to camp in.

Owens shook his head. "I have to tell you kid, when we first got the journal, we wasted two weeks with archaeologists and linguists. They were all stumped. Then we reached out to a professor at UNAM in Mexico. After a few days he told us these were genuine Mayan glyphs, but they weren't being used in a way the Mayans would recognize."

"That's when we realized it was a code," Remo continued. "But you figured it out in sixty seconds. Outstanding."

"Well, I mean, it was a lucky guess," Mike stammered.

Owens wasn't having it. "Please, 'lucky guess.' I had a feeling you'd figure this out, kid. That's one of the reasons I brought you here."

Mike looked over at El. If she'd been glowing before, she was incandescent now.

His heart skipped and two years of longing crashed over him without warning. *Enough of this Excalibur stuff*, he thought. *I want to spend time with my girlfriend.*

* * *

El held tightly to Mike's arm as they walked in the night air. They left the observatory building behind and followed the road. The desert spread out before them, quiet and lonely. The sky was deep blue over the distant mountains, turning to star-filled blackness above.

El couldn't stop touching him. She wound her arm in his, leaned her head against his shoulder, tugged at his shirt as they talked. She couldn't help it. Mike was here now, after so long, and her fingers ached for the feel of him.

When they stopped to watch the moon rise over the telescopes, she tucked a strand of his long hair back behind his ear.

It made her shiver.Mike was more beautiful than ever.He'd been gorgeous when she saw him last but *now*...

He towered over her by a head.There were lean cords of muscle on his slender arms and a greyhound's strength in his wiry form.His thick black hair had grown into a shaggy mane that she longed to feel tangled in her fingers.All of that paled beside the glory of his face: full luscious lips, a bold masculine nose, big eyes shining with brilliance.

As they talked, one thought kept running through her head:*This is Mike.After all this time, this is Mike.*

Their words were awkward at first.They'd been apart for so long and El was never one for saying much.She let Mike do the talking.He told her about Hawkins, about Lucas and Max, about his trip through the desert from Roswell.But then he asked questions.How was she?Was everything okay?

El answered as best she could.She wanted to be truthful, but she didn't want Mike to know how miserable she'd been, how much every day without him filled her with despair.There were demogorgons after him and he didn't need another burden.So she talked about anything that came to mind, and she stayed away from the things she wanted to say, the questions that had plagued her for two long years.

Do you still want me?Do you still love me?Do you want to be with me forever the way I want to be with you?

Instead, El told Mike that she'd learned about the stars.She told him how it made up a little for being so far from the sea.She talked about Joyce.She told Mike how upset her mother had been when she and Will went away.

Mike listened, his eyes filled with sympathy.Mike was good at listening.

"Mrs. Byers didn't come with you?" he asked.

El shook her head."Dr. Owens wouldn't let her.He said it was top

secret.He said she didn't need to know."

Mike whistled."I bet that didn't go down very well."

"She said she wouldn't let us go.But Will started yelling at her.He said we were eighteen.He said we could do what we wanted."

"Will said that?"

"He did.My mom started to cry.But Will..."She searched for the right words."Will has been angry a lot lately.He's not as nice as he used to be."

Mike thought about that for a while."Is Will being picked on at school?Are people mean to him?"

El shrugged."Not really.He has friends.Everyone in his classes likes him.He's just... I don't know.He's not happy."It wasn't a great answer, she knew, but she'd never been good at understanding people.Will's anger was one more thing she couldn't figure out.

They were quiet in the darkness, standing under the radio telescopes.When Mike spoke again, his voice was hesitant."What about you, El?Are people mean to you?"

She shook her head."Not anymore.They've learned to leave me alone."

Mike's eyebrows went up."What did you do?"

She smiled."Do you remember Eddie Ricker?That boy who kept picking on me when I moved to Maine?When I didn't have my powers?"

"Um...yeah," Mike said, worry in his tone.

Her smile turned into a grin."He tried it again last year and I made him pee his pants in front of the whole cafeteria.Him and all his friends."

Mike laughed."El, you didn't!"

She giggled. "He wouldn't come near me after that! And Mike, you should have seen the look on his face! It was just like that mouth-breather in Hawkins when we were twelve."

"You mean Troy?"

"Like Troy." She giggled again and Mike smiled, but maybe not as wide as she'd expected. The laughter died in her throat.

Like Troy. Oh no. She was so stupid. Her heart knotted up as she watched Mike's face.

"Mike... are people picking on you?"

He smiled again, gently, and shook his head. "Not really. I mean, school is school and kids are kids. And I'm... I'm into science and computers, and I'm not very good at sports, and that's never going to make school life great. But it's not bad."

"Mike," she said, reaching up to touch his face.

He took her hand and kissed her palm. "Really, El, it's okay. I may be thin, but I'm pretty tall now. And the guys at school have learned I won't back down."

That El could believe. Mike once jumped on a demogorgon's back to save her. He'd driven a car off a cliff to save the world. He was the bravest person El had ever met. It was one of the reasons she fell in love with him.

"Even if they can beat me up," Mike continued, "I think it's tiring for them to keep fighting me all the time. Plus... Lucas helps me out. He's really athletic. He's on the basketball team now. People don't like to mess with him and they know he's my friend. He backs me up."

El couldn't speak. Her heart filled with affection for Lucas, forever grateful to him for watching over her beautiful boy.

She stroked Mike's cheek, her throat tight. There was a time when Mike wouldn't take help from anyone, not even his friends. He carried the world on his shoulders. He faced every challenge alone, resigned to defeat, because he didn't think he was worth saving.

But things changed. Mike had been through a lot in the years since she'd met him. El knew he still felt bad about himself, but maybe a little less than before.

His cheek was smooth under her fingertips. *Oh Mike, you'll always be worth saving.*

He kissed her palm again, holding her hand gently in his long fingers. The look in his dark eyes stirred a rush of warmth inside her. Her heart started to race.

"El," he said, "we've talked a lot, but you haven't really told me if you're okay."

She swallowed hard. "I'm... sort of. I'm okay. I guess. I've missed you, Mike."

Every day, all the time, her heart whispered. *I cry myself to sleep because you're not here.*

But she didn't say that.

He squeezed her hand. "I missed you too."

"I do what I can. I have friends. Steve and Will. Lieutenant Remo is nice to me. And there's Ewan."

"Ewan." Mike's voice was oddly flat. He pushed a strand of hair back from his face. A small part of El's mind noticed he let go of her hand to do it.

"Yes. He's nice. He's the first friend I've made since Hawkins. He looks out for me and he helps me not feel so lonely. He teaches me things."

Mike cleared his throat. "Does he?"

"Yes. He taught me about the stars. He's very smart."

"That's great," Mike said. There was that flat tone again. El wondered if Mike had caught a cold. Maybe he was allergic to something. There were a surprising number of plants in the desert, and the pollen could bother people.

"I know you just met him, but do you like him, Mike?" she asked hopefully.

"Um..."

"Because I think it would be great if you were friends. Ewan's sweet. He's funny and smart just like you are. You two have a lot in common."

Mike stepped away from her, pushing his hair back again. "Well, like you said, I just met the guy." He checked his watch. "It's getting late. We should probably get back."

El blinked in surprise. Mike looked back at the observatory building. He put his hands in his pockets. He took another step away from her.

"Mike," said El, confused, "is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," he said. "I'm just... it's been a long day, El, and I'm really beat. I've gotten like three hours of sleep in the last two days. I need to get some rest."

"Okay," El said but Mike had already turned on his heel and started walking. She hurried after him as he made his way toward the dormitory wing. She managed to catch up and linked her arm through his.

Mike walked quickly. El thought he seemed very stiff. He was probably exhausted. She squeezed his arm affectionately but he didn't look at her.

They paused when they reached the doors to the dormitory wing.

"Mike," El apologized, "there's something I need to finish up for Dr. Owens before I go to bed."

"Okay," he said. "Goodnight, El." He gently pulled his arm free of hers, pushed open the door and walked down the hall toward his room. He didn't look back.

El watched him go, bewildered.

He hadn't even kissed her goodnight.

* * *

Mike stared at the ceiling of his room, trying to figure out when he'd become such a colossal idiot. He wasn't sure what was dumber – letting Ewan get under his skin, walking away from El with barely a 'goodnight' or...

Or allowing himself to hope in the first place.

Ewan's funny and smart just like you are. You two have a lot in common.

"Except he looks like a fucking movie star," Mike muttered to himself.

He's the first friend I've made since Hawkins.

"I was the first friend you made ever," Mike said to the empty room.

He watched the moonlight creep across the wall.

He'd walked away from El and left her standing alone in the dark. After two years apart.

"Shit," he groaned.

He grabbed his Walkman off the nightstand and pulled the headphones over his ears. He pushed play. Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band sounded in his ears and his heart sank.

It was *Against the Wind*. The song was slow and moody, with acoustic guitar and gentle piano. Mike always pressed fast forward when it came up. He couldn't take the lyrics.

But they were right for tonight.

Mike closed his eyes and let Bob Seger sing.

*It seems like yesterday,
But it was long ago.
Janey was lovely, she was the queen of my nights,
There in the darkness with the radio playing low.*

Mike sighed. Of course the girl in the song was named Jane. Seger couldn't have tortured him more if he tried.

*The secrets that we shared,
The mountains that we moved.
Caught like a wildfire out of control,
Till there was nothing left to burn and nothing left to prove.*

*And I remember what she said to me,
How she swore that it never would end.
I remember how she held me oh so tight.
Wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then.*

*Against the wind.
We were running against the wind.
We were young and strong,
We were running against the wind.*

The song moved into a piano break. Mike opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling again. He felt the pain in the lyrics, the bitter wisdom. Seger started again.

*The years rolled slowly past,
And I found myself alone—*

Mike turned the song off. He couldn't listen anymore. His thoughts turned round and round in the darkness.

When it all came down to it, most young loves ended, didn't they? There weren't many people who married their childhood sweethearts. Mike couldn't think of any.

Take Max and Lucas. They'd been together since junior high and anyone could see they were just going through the motions now. It was easier, Mike supposed, than admitting the things you felt were gone.

How many people thought – *thought* – they were in love and got married and had kids and then it all turned out to be nothing?

People like Mike's parents. Like Dustin's. Good lord, like Max's.

Love was a hard thing.

What was that line from the song?

Wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then.

* * *

Dart padded through the empty halls of the Project. He'd never been impressed by the antiseptic caves the humans lived in, and this one was worse than most.

The floors were slick and featureless. It made movement irritating; there were no rough patches or ridges to sink your claws in for purchase. The place reeked of chemicals and sour human sweat. There were no convenient catch-pools carved in the walls, no soothing drip of water from stalactites.

The hum of the ever-lights in the ceiling set Dart's teeth on edge.

At least the lights were turned down for the night, with most of the humans off to their sleeping platforms. But the hum was still there, omnipresent. Dart decided that the human who made the lights must have been a... *jerk*? Yes, that was the right term. A jerk.

The young male called Will had been teaching him words. Not so Dart could say them, of course. His five jaws and tooth-filled mouth would never mimic human speech. But at least he could understand what the humans were saying. At least a little bit.

Today, Will had taught him human terms of disrespect: *jerk*, *doofus*, *bitch* and the like. Dart had been curious, and inquired, because the young dark-skinned male and the female with hair like flame used

the words a lot, and at high volume. Dart found their behavior odd. The two spent so much time together, yet they snarled at each other like they were from warring Hives.

Are they not a mated pair? he'd asked Will.

"Um... it's complicated," the small human said. "They've been together a while."

Dart considered that. *So 'bitch' is a term of fellowship?*

"Uh..." Will glanced around nervously. "Okay, I'll tell you what some of this stuff means, but you can't tell Dr. Owens, okay?"

I will not tell the Portly-Elder, Dart promised. *Can I tell the Bat-Wielder?*

"Steve. His name is Steve. And yes, you can tell him. But no one else."

Not the Adversary?

"Especially not the Adversary. I don't want her knowing words like this. She can get... confused... about when to use them."

Now, Dart stalked the halls and turned his new words over in his mind. He wondered if he could adapt some for the speech of the Dark Worlders. There was potential there.

He paused, looking up ahead. Bright light spilled into the hallway from one of the side rooms. Dart recognized it as the one Will called 'the computer lab.' He crept forward and poked his head through the door.

There were only two humans inside, not surprising given the hour. One was a warrior wearing the drab olive uniform of his kind. The warrior stood on his feet beside a cabinet, looking bored.

The other was the male called Ewan.

The young human was sitting in front of one of the glowing square boxes that filled the room. He tapped at a rectangular board in front of the box, each stroke of his fingers making a clacking noise. Dart wondered if it was some kind of musical instrument, but that seemed

unlikely as it only made one sound. The glowing square filled up with squiggles as Ewan tapped – perhaps that was the purpose.

Ewan pressed the board one more time with an air of finality. Then he pushed a button on the glowing box and a thin black square slid out of it. Dart watched, puzzled.

Ewan looked cautiously over his shoulder at the warrior. Satisfied the man wasn't watching, Ewan slipped the black square into a pocket in his clothing. He reached into another pocket and took out a second square, virtually identical to the first.

He's switching the squares, Dart realized, and he doesn't want the warrior to know. I wonder why?

Ewan got up from his chair and walked to the cabinet. He handed the second black square to the warrior and said words that Dart recognized as *All done*. The warrior put the black square into the cabinet. Ewan turned for the door.

He froze when he saw Dart.

Then he scowled and made a gesture. *Move*.

Dart growled, a low rumble in his throat.

Ewan clenched his fists. Dart's growl deepened... but he backed away.

He could sense the human's strength. Void essence swirled around the young male, thick and bright. There was so much power there, Dart thought it might even be a match for the Adversary.

Ewan stepped past Dart into the hallway. He glanced back at the warrior, but the man was leaning against the wall now, his eyes closed. Ewan pointed at Dart, his posture full of threat. He said something, and though Dart couldn't understand the exact words, the meaning was clear.

One day.

Then Ewan turned and walked away.

Dart watched until the young human vanished around a corner. *Yes, Ewan, he thought. One day. You are powerful, but I don't fear you. I've fought God. I'll fight you too. I'll fight you, Ewan, because you are...*

Dart paused and searched through his new words. Then he nodded, satisfied.

Because you are an asshole.

6. The Lonely

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy holidays everyone!

As is probably apparent, I've had very little time to write this year - work continues to be so awful. So please forgive me if I'm out of practice and a little rusty.

Anyway, I hope you like the new chapter and I wish everyone a safe and happy new year.

**The VLA Observatory
San Agustin Plains, New Mexico
Monday, April 25, 1988**

El lay in bed and watched the morning light crawl across the ceiling. She squirmed, twisting the blanket around her body. Her fists bunched in the bedsheets, then she huffed and flipped over on her stomach. She squirmed again.

She knew Mike had been tired last night. The poor boy had hardly slept in two days. But still... he could have kissed her.

He should have kissed her.

Her mind fogged up with images of Mike's mouth. It was so... *sensuous*. That was the word. Mike's mouth was sensuous. It was a wide mouth, with full, soft lips, and El could feel those lips against her own even as she lay alone in her bed. She could feel Mike's velvety tongue pushing into her mouth, caressing the inside, while his long, gentle fingers stroked her skin...

El flopped over on her back and dug her fingers into the mattress and she just wanted to *scream*.

She didn't think she'd ever been this frustrated. She was anxious, and irritable, and it seemed like every nerve ending was hypersensitive. She was acutely aware of her t-shirt, the soft cotton

somehow coarse and abrasive against her skin.

She clenched her thighs together against the persistent ache low in her belly. It seemed to help, but only for a second, and then she was squirming in the sheets again.

What was wrong with her? She couldn't focus on anything. Every time she tried to pull her thoughts together, they atomized, drifting away in a vapor only to coalesce in another vision of Mike.

Mike. God, she just wanted to grab him and... and *something*.

El closed her eyes and saw him again, floating in front of her as she lay on the bed. He was right there, lush waves of black hair framing his face. The long strands spilled over her and she could feel them like silk against her cheek. Mike wasn't wearing a shirt and El imagined him lowering his weight onto her, the smooth ivory skin of his chest sliding against her hard nipples...

Her eyes shot open as she realized what was wrong with her.

Oh god, she thought. *I'm horny*.

Horny.

Aroused.

El remembered when Max first told her about arousal two years ago in Maine. Max helped her understand the feelings were normal, and not something to worry about, and something that could be so, so good.

El remembered when she and Mike dealt with her arousal, in the middle of danger and daring and saving the world.

And then they dealt with it again, and again after that, and again after that.

But they hadn't *dealt with it* since El saw him at Christmas eighteen months ago.

She bit her lip. It all made sense now. Mike was finally here – beautiful

and breathtaking and lighting her blood on fire – and El’s body was tapping its watch and wondering why the orgasms were taking so long.

She groaned. Over the last eighteen months she had, of course, been *aroused* on occasion. Sometimes there would be a delicious night when her dreams were visited by an alluring vision of Mike. Other times it would be a vivid daydream. Either way, El would find herself buzzing and full of tension, her body wired with anxious energy. In those moments she could be downright grumpy, scowling at everyone and everything.

But it would always pass, gradually fading out of her body until she was back to normal.

It was never like this. *This* was a maddening itch that refused to go away until someone *scratched* it. And El knew exactly who needed to scratch it and for some reason he’d gone to bed last night without even kissing her.

She forced herself off the bed and into her bathroom. It was a functional space without an ounce of character, like every other room in the Project. El tried to brighten it with pink towels and yellow desert wildflowers, but they fought a losing battle against institutional government blandness.

There was no bathtub, just a small stand-up shower. El eyed the taps, thinking. She’d once heard Steve and Sully joking about cold showers. El hadn’t understood it all, but they’d made it sound like a of cure for arousal. It didn’t sound very appealing – El preferred warm, luxurious baths when she could get them – but at this point she was willing to try anything.

She turned the tap far to the right and quickly shed her clothes. The water poured down, looking grim and inhospitable, and El found herself missing the usual blanket of warm steam. Before she could lose her nerve, she stepped into the shower.

It was so cold she could barely breathe.

Gasping, she fought through a hurried shampoo and a fast scrub of

her skin. Then she washed away the soap and closed the tap with shaking fingers.

El waited, shivering, watching the water bead on her goose-pimpled skin.

An image flickered across her mind. It was Mike, his pale skin slick and wet, his strong arms wrapped around her naked body. His lips were at her neck, right at her fluttering pulse-point, and his hands were sliding down her body, down, down...

Her teeth chattered.

Great. Now she wasn't just horny. Now she was horny and freezing.

* * *

El stomped through the halls of the Project toward the cryptography lab. She was officially *In A Mood*. Soldiers and scientists started to say hello as she passed; then they spotted her frown and buried their noses in paperwork until she was gone. One poor government suit, caught without a file in his hands, faced the wall and pretended to read an office safety poster until El vanished around the corner.

A small part of her mind – the part that wasn't tense and frustrated and ready to lash out at anyone who even *looked* at her wrong – felt bad about it. She knew irritable teenage girls were hard to deal with even on the best of days. When the irritable teenage girl could *kill you with a thought*, well... El could understand why that might scare people, and scaring people wasn't very nice.

That didn't stop her from hurling the lab door open with her powers, slamming it into the wall so hard the plaster cracked. She stormed into the room, glaring, ready for some nitwit to challenge her so she could tear into them like a wildcat.

Two white-coated scientists stared at her, wide-eyed.

Off to her left, someone cleared their throat.

“Uh... ordinarily I'd say ‘Good Morning’...”

It was Ewan. The boy was calm and relaxed, sitting at a table piled high with documents.

“...but I'm guessing ‘Please don't hurt me’ might work better?”

The slightest smile, friendly and teasing, played across his handsome face.

El felt the irritation draining out of her. Something about Ewan's voice made it hard to stay angry.

Maybe it was the smooth masculine timbre. Maybe it was the way his tone blended self-satisfaction and gentle self-mockery.

The boy was always so sure of himself, without taking himself seriously. He was cocky but not conceited; assured but not arrogant.

El found it terribly endearing.

She felt silly now, after her stormy entrance full of banging doors and cracking drywall.

“I had a bad morning,” she said, trying to hold on to her irritation.

Ewan's smile got a little wider, a little more teasing. “Wake up on the wrong side of the bed, did we?”

A few years ago, El would have taken that literally. She could picture herself at age twelve, staring at a bed, trying to figure out which was the *right* side. But she was older now, wiser, and she knew Ewan's words were just a figure of speech.

Which was unfortunate, because it meant Ewan was actually asking why she was in a bad mood. She didn't want to tell him – or these two scientists – that she was having sexy thoughts about Mike. El had learned you didn't talk about that kind of thing in public.

“The water in my shower was freezing,” she said lamely. Technically

that wasn't a lie, even if she was leaving out some important context.

"A freezing shower? That's awful!" Ewan was still teasing her, just a little, but she also heard genuine concern in his voice. He jumped to his feet. "We need to get you warmed up!"

Before El realized it, Ewan was next to her with an arm around her waist and her hand in his. He pulled her snugly against him. *This is a dance position*, she realized.

Ewan nodded to one of the scientists. "Give us a beat, maestro!"

The man looked at him blankly. "What?"

"Music, man! Hum a waltz! This girl needs to warm up and that means dancing!"

With that, Ewan started moving, one-two-three, one-two-three, stepping and spinning around the room with El in his arms. She gasped, bewildered and delighted by Ewan's foolishness. The boy hummed loudly, a tune El didn't recognize but perfectly timed with his steps.

"Come on, man, we need music!" said Ewan as they spun past the scientist again. The man laughed and started to hum along. The other scientist joined in, clapping in time. El giggled, her mood forgotten as she whirled around the lab in Ewan's arms.

She looked up at the boy's smiling face, seeing the laughter in his eyes.

Ewan always knows how to cheer me up, she thought. *I'm lucky to have such a good friend.*

* * *

The VLA Observatory
San Agustin Plains, New Mexico

Monday, April 25, 1988

“Quit moping around and get ready, Mike. Owens wants us in the crypto lab in twenty minutes.”

Mike groaned at Lucas' words but hauled himself out of bed. He didn't think he'd gotten more than a few hours' sleep. Despite his exhaustion, he'd stayed up for hours last night, staring at the ceiling and listening to tragic songs of lost love.

It figures, Mike thought. Owens' people not only packed my Walkman, they also packed the most agonizing mix tape I've ever made. It's a sign from the universe.

He went to the shower and turned it on hot. As the water pulsed over him, he closed his eyes, letting the heat and steam soothe him.

Stop being such a doofus, he told himself. Everything is going to be fine. This is El you're talking about. Your El. She loves you. She brought you back from the dead, for chrissakes. So stop feeling sorry for yourself, grow a pair, and let her know you love her too.

He opened his eyes, blinking away the water. Feeling resolved, he quickly washed up, then reached for the shower tap. He paused.

Back in Hawkins, Mike usually didn't end his morning shower until he'd... relieved some stress.

If he was back in Hawkins, he'd let the warm water cascade over him while he stroked himself with a soapy fist. Memories of El would dance through his mind. In those moments, Mike could practically feel his mouth on hers, hear her whimpers as he caressed her breasts and ground himself against her. In those moments, he could see her lovely face, tense and almost anguished as she rode him to orgasm. It was always those memories of El in climax, moaning out her release, that sent Mike over the edge, splattering himself across the shower wall.

He turned off the water, sighing. Not today. Not here. It didn't feel right, not after yesterday and last night and... and everything else.

He got dressed quickly, brushed his teeth, made a futile attempt to comb his thick mop of hair. Then he stepped into the common area

where Lucas was waiting for him.

Lucas checked his watch, eyebrows raised. "That was fast. Back in Hawkins your showers always take forever. You must be eager to get started."

"Uh... yeah. That must be it." Mike glanced around the room. "Where are Max and Dustin? Aren't they coming with us?"

"Dustin's at the motor pool with Steve. I think Max is off somewhere with Sully and Lineker. I'm not sure – it's not my day to watch her." Lucas' mouth drew in a tight line. "She's a big girl, she can take care of herself."

"Right," Mike said awkwardly. "I guess we should go then?"

"Let's go."

They walked the halls, barely speaking, each boy lost in his own thoughts. Soldiers and government types passed by them without a word.

Mike couldn't stop thinking about her. El's face, the sweep of her hair, those doe eyes of deepest brown that he could drown in. She haunted his every moment.

He should have kissed her last night. Lord, he was such an idiot.

Granted, he'd been upset. He'd been a pissy little bitch, to be honest. A real man would have pushed past that. A real man would have set his anger aside and pulled El into his arms, kissed her with so much love that she forgot about every other guy she knew.

Mike groaned, reliving his failure, but he shook the doubts away. It wasn't too late. When he saw El this morning, he would make it better. He would sweep her up, confess his love, and apologize for his idiot behavior last night. He would tell her that he was hers and she was his, forever.

Yes. He'd do exactly that. And everything would be okay.

He and Lucas kept walking. There was a numbing sameness

everywhere Mike looked. The Project might be delving into world-shattering secrets, but the building itself showed nothing but linoleum tile, drop ceilings, and long hallways of anonymous doors.

“This place makes me miss the catacombs under Whateley House,” said Mike. “At least they had some character.”

Lucas snorted. “You’re not kidding. Remind me to never get a government job.”

A voice rang out behind them. “There you boys are! Just in time.”

It was Dr. Owens. He bustled down the hall toward them, an amiable smile plastered across his face.

“Morning, sir,” said Lucas.

“Good morning, my young apprentices,” the doctor said, rubbing his hands together gleefully. “Ready to save the world?”

“Uh... I guess,” said Mike.

“Good! Because the cryptography lab is right down here. Let’s put you boys to work.”

As they followed Owens down the corridor, Mike heard laughter in the distance. It grew louder as they turned the corner. It was coming from an open door marked ‘Cryptography’ at the end of the hall.

It was a girl’s laugh.

It was El’s.

Mike walked down the hall and stepped through the door and something inside him died.

He didn’t register the computer terminals, the long rows of servers, the tables piled high with documents. He didn’t notice the two scientists in white lab coats.

All he saw was El, giggling in Ewan’s arms as the young man spun her around the room.

The pair did one more spin before they realized they had visitors. They stumbled to a halt and stepped apart.

El was still laughing.

“Mike!” she said, smiling. “I didn’t realize you’d be here this morning – I’m so glad!”

“Okay,” Mike said flatly.

“Are you here to help Ewan with codebreaking?”

“I guess so.”

Mike didn’t say anything else. Silence filled the room.

Lucas and Owens watched them awkwardly. Ewan coughed, trying to hide a smirk behind his hand.

The silence stretched. El’s smile faded.

Mike turned to Owens. “Let’s not stand around, Doc. I’m sure there’s a lot to do.”

* * *

**The VLA Observatory
San Agustin Plains, New Mexico
Monday, April 25, 1988**

“Hold here.”

Lying on his back under the jeep, Dustin gripped down on the cam shaft. Beside him, Steve yanked with the wrench. There wasn’t much room under the big vehicle and it made everything awkward. Steve finally gave up with a sigh.

“Damnit,” the young soldier said. “I can’t get any leverage on this thing. What was the Army thinking when they ran a cam-in-block on this piece of junk?”

“I think it keeps the profile lower,” Dustin said helpfully. “You’d add more height with overhead cams. It gives the enemy a little less to shoot at.”

Steve stared at the curly-haired boy lying next to him on the concrete. “It was a rhetorical question, Henderson. But thanks anyway.”

Dustin shrugged. “We just need to get more space under here, Steve. Is there a lift? I think we’ve pushed these jacks to the limit.”

“No, the kit here is pretty basic. I think the Doc prioritized high-tech deep space stuff over motor pool gear.” Steve frowned thoughtfully. “I suppose we could get Dart to crawl under the front bumper and lift it with his back...”

“No!” Will said sharply. The small boy was sitting by the motor pool wall, stroking Dart’s scaly hide. “You remember last time? Dart pushed so hard he flipped the jeep over. You guys almost squashed Hondo.”

“Yeah, fair point. Hondo was pretty pissed about that one. What if we tell Dart to lift really slowly this time...” Harrington sighed at the look on Will’s face. “Fine, Byers, have it your way. I’ll get El to levitate the jeep for me when she’s done helping the Doc.” He huffed in annoyance. “I guess that’s as far as we’re going to get today – let’s bag it, Henderson.”

Dustin and Steve slid out from under the jeep and got to their feet. Dustin watched Steve for a moment. The older boy – *man*, Dustin reminded himself, *he’s a man now* – stared at the jeep in frustration, then crouched down and started lowering the jacks.

It’s good to be a team again, Dustin thought. *Even on something small like fixing an engine.*

Me and Steve. The two amigos.

Brothers.

“It sounds like you and El have gotten pretty close,” Dustin said, unable to help himself.

Harrington shrugged. "I guess so. We've been through a lot together. It's funny, I never really talked to El before, even when we were fighting the Upside Down together in Maine. I didn't really get to know her until Kamchatka."

Dustin waited but it seemed that was all Steve planned to say. Dustin couldn't leave it there. It was like picking at a scab. "What happened in Kamchatka?"

Steve got the jeep's wheels on the ground and pulled out the jacks. "Well... it got pretty hairy. The Doc sent us in – me and El and Remo's team. We were looking for the Russians' old Gate, and we hoped we'd find some clues about Hopper too. But the Russian base had been abandoned long ago. The Gate was closed. There were no leads, nothing to go on." He hesitated. "We found something else, though..."

Dustin waited expectantly. And waited. He suddenly realized his friend was pausing deliberately, trying to build dramatic tension. It took a conscious effort not to roll his eyes.

"What did you find?" he asked.

A grim smile crossed Harrington's face. The young soldier waited another beat and then... "Zombies."

Will coughed. "I think you mean retrovirus victims."

"They were zombies, dude!"

"Not according to Dr. Owens."

"He wasn't there!"

"Steve—"

"If he'd been there—"

"So what happened?" Dustin interrupted. He knew Steve could spend hours in a pointless back and forth if you didn't keep him focused.

Harrington collected his thoughts. "So, we were wandering the ruins

of this old Russian base, looking for clues. Then all of a sudden these *zombies*—” he glared at Will, “—come shambling out of the cellars and attack us. There were only a few of them, but the things just kept coming at us. Our guns didn’t stop them. We poured on the firepower but the bullets just chipped away little pieces.”

“Whoa,” said Dustin, impressed and repulsed at the same time. “What did you do?”

“There wasn’t much we could do, except take them down hand to hand. Seriously, if it wasn’t for Dart and El, I don’t think we’d have made it. As it is, we got pretty banged up – most of the unit had to evac out.”

“Most of the unit?” Dustin’s eyebrows shot up. “That sounds pretty serious.”

“It was,” said Steve, “and it got worse. As we completed our sweep, we found a secret lab in the lowest level of the base. The Russians had been using it to make a zombie serum—”

“Retrovirus,” said Will.

“*Zombie serum*,” Steve repeated. “I’m thinking the commies were going to use it as some kind of weapon, but it got out of control and turned their scientists into the walking dead.”

“Technically they were still alive,” said Will.

“They looked pretty dead to me,” Steve snapped. “You know... except for the part where they walked around and tried to kill everyone.”

“Wait a minute,” said Dustin. “If Remo’s team got injured and had to evac out, wouldn’t that mean they turned into zombies too?”

“The infection only transmits through saliva,” Will explained. “So you have to get bitten to be infected. Luckily, none of the team were.”

Steve seemed ready to argue but he paused, turning Will’s words over in his head. “Uh... Will’s right,” he finally agreed. “Anyway, when we searched the lab, we found out there was a Ground Zero – the place where the zombie plague originally began. And get this – the first

mentions of the plague were more than *two thousand* years old.”

“No way,” Dustin breathed.

“Way. We also found Russian intelligence reports that said someone – or *something* – was creating more zombies at Ground Zero. Enough to form an army that could threaten the entire world.”

“Oh no,” Dustin gasped. He reminded himself that the world was perfectly fine, so obviously the zombies had been defeated – somehow.

“We hacked the Russian databases and found out Ground Zero was these ancient ruins on the shore of the Black Sea. Think about it – the zombies had been there since the time of the ancient Greeks, just waiting to be awakened!”

“That’s... that’s pretty cool,” said Dustin. He glanced at Will, who nodded agreement. Even Dart gave a little bark.

“It was cool,” Steve agreed. “And with most of the team out of action, it was up to me, Dart and El to go out to the Black Sea and put a stop to it.”

“Just... just the three of you?”

Harrington hesitated. Reluctantly, he said, “Well, there was this CIA guy too. Jack McAllister. Total douchebag. Unfortunately, he was the only guy who knew where to find a weapon we could use against the zombies.”

Dustin remembered yesterday’s conversation after dinner and gasped. “The Blade of Achilles!”

Steve nodded. “The Blade of Achilles. It was hidden in this old temple north of Istanbul. We grabbed the Blade and then we set off – just the four of us – to face an army of the walking dead. McAllister punked out right at the beginning, of course. Saw his first zombie and ran for the hills. So El and Dart and I had to go on alone.”

Steve grew quiet then. The young soldier’s hand drifted to his neck. Dustin realized there was a scar there, long and thin and black.

“What happened?” Dustin asked, his voice almost a whisper.

“We saved the world,” said Steve. “I used the Blade, and El used her powers, and Dart... well, he did what he does best.”

Dustin could imagine the scene as Steve kept talking. “It was the three of us, fighting back to back. What’s that three-headed dog from mythology? Cerberus? That was us. A three-headed beast that went through those zombies like a whirlwind.”

Steve smiled, lost in memory. “The Blade... it was amazing, Henderson. It *guided me*, just like the Spear did back in Maine. You should have seen the zombies go down under that sword. I *felt* like Achilles, you know?”

Dustin didn’t know, but he could imagine.

“At the end, we faced the King of the Zombies – this ancient evil the Russians had woken up from centuries of slumber. We fought it, and we beat it.” Steve grew thoughtful, stroking the scar on his neck. “I saved El’s life. El saved mine.”

The motor pool was quiet.

Harrington blinked, coming back to himself. “Hey, sorry about that! Think I went a little too far down memory lane. Anyway, yeah, ever since then El and I have been close. I guess you could say she’s like my little sister now.”

“I suppose that makes me your little brother?” asked Will. He tried to sound snarky, but the story had clearly affected him and the sarcasm was forced.

Harrington snarked back. “Let’s see, that would make you my sort-of-but-not-really little brother *by adoption*? Sure, whatever makes you happy, Byers.”

But Steve was smiling.

Will checked his watch then and sighed. “Well, as much as I enjoyed ‘Story Time with Steve,’ Dart and I need to get going. We have to go over last night’s signals from the Oort Cloud.”

Steve checked his own watch. “Holy shit! Is that the time? I’m late for a debrief on the Indiana mission – Remo’s going to rip me a new one!”

They made their goodbyes and scrambled from the motor pool, Dart barking beside them. Dustin half-expected a cartoon cloud of dust to rise up as they hurried away. He watched his friends until they were gone from sight.

He looked around the motor pool. There were rows of cars, tools on the walls, and the broken jeep in front of him. Without his friends, the room felt bigger than it had before.

* * *

The VLA Observatory
San Agustin Plains, New Mexico
Monday, April 25, 1988

El sat in the big dish of the radio telescope and looked out across the desert. The woolen blanket beneath her chafed her legs, but there was no helping it. At midday, the steel plates of the dish were hot enough to burn bare skin.

Nothing moved in the desert. Every sensible creature was resting now, waiting for the heat to pass.

El wasn’t in the mood for sensible.

Everything was going wrong.

She’d spent three hours in the crypto lab that morning with Mike, Lucas and Ewan. It should have been a happy gathering, a meeting of friends old and new, full of laughter and fun.

It was a disaster. It was one of the worst mornings El could remember. Things should have been so wonderful with Mike there, but somehow they turned out badly *because* he was there.

Mike was being... strange. He’d been so cold this morning. He barely

acknowledged her existence.He hardly said a word to her for *three hours*.

It wasn't just her.The way Mike had acted toward Ewan wasn't... friendly.El knew her boyfriend could be cautious around new people.He'd been bullied a lot growing up, so it took him a while to trust someone.But Mike's behavior toward Ewan didn't feel like caution.If the idea wasn't so crazy, El would swear that Mike *didn't like* Ewan.

Ewan didn't seem very thrilled about Mike either.Every time he smiled at Mike, it didn't quite reach his eyes.He showed an awful lot of teeth in those smiles.He teased Mike too, the way boys did when they liked each other, but sometimes Ewan's teasing seemed... mean.

As El thought about it, Ewan was behaving oddly in other ways.The boy had always been nice to her, but after Mike showed up yesterday, he had become especially attentive.Ewan almost seemed to seek her out, wanting to help with her work or pick up her mood with a few jokes.

He was also touching her more than he used to.He was always draping an arm over her shoulder or brushing a hand across her hip.It wasn't that El minded – it was nice when people were affectionate, especially when your boyfriend acted so uninterested – but it was weird.

Of course, Ewan didn't do anything... inappropriate.He didn't try to touch El in places that were private.But now, when Ewan's hand absent-mindedly brushed her hip, El felt a little strange – like maybe it wasn't really absent-minded and maybe it was getting closer to places only her boyfriend should touch.

She chided herself for being silly.Ewan would never do anything like that.He was a good friend, and he knew she was in love with Mike, so he knew he would never be anything more than her friend.

El stared out at the desert, frustrated.She couldn't figure out what was wrong with Mike and she couldn't figure out why he and Ewan were acting so strange.

She just didn't understand boys.

With that, she knew what she needed to do. If she didn't understand boys, she had to talk to someone who did.

El got to her feet, put the blanket in her backpack, and climbed from the dish down to the desert floor. She set off for the observatory buildings at a brisk walk that soon turned into a jog. In moments she reached the public entrance, pushing the doors open and gasping as air-conditioned cold spilled over her sun-kissed skin.

Max was in the little lobby museum, idly browsing the displays. El's abrupt entrance startled her, but the surprise passed in an instant and a smile broke across the redhead's face.

"El, there you are! I was wondering where—"

"Sorry Max!" El called, waving at her friend as she walked quickly to the doors of the Project wing. "I have to do something now. Let's talk later!"

"What do you mean, later?" Max asked, surprised again. "El, I haven't seen you all day, maybe I can go with—"

El lost the rest as the doors closed behind her.

* * *

**The VLA Observatory
San Agustin Plains, New Mexico
Monday, April 25, 1988**

Steve sat at the desk in his room, reading an operations manual.

Well, not reading exactly. He was running his eyes over the words. He registered each one, but he couldn't seem to piece them together into something like a sentence. He rubbed his eyes, groaning.

Remo had in fact ripped him a new one for being late to the debrief. The lieutenant wasn't angry, of course – he seldom got angry. His dressing-downs were worse because of it. Remo's comments were always calm, factual and honest... and they made his disappointment very clear.

Disappointing a man like Remo – a soldier respected across the special forces community – made Steve feel lower than worms. It was worse than a hundred angry rants from some puffed-up drill sergeant.

Still, it had been nice to connect again with Henderson. It reminded Steve of the good old days, back when he was just a fuck-up. In those days, Steve had no girlfriend, no plan and no prospects. He spent his days clerking for minimum wage with no hope of anything better. In those days, Steve went from king of Hawkins High to the bottom of the barrel.

But the thing about being a fuck-up, it was *easy*. You didn't have to put in a lot of effort if you wanted to drift through life and not accomplish anything.

Not putting in a lot of effort was kind of the point.

Sure, being a fuck-up came with a lot of downsides. The disdain of your parents, the sneers of your classmates, the depressing feeling that you were wasting your life. But there was an odd comfort in just phoning it in.

Steve would never go back to that life. He was a special forces badass now, not to mention a responsible adult. He had duties and obligations. He worked hard to earn the respect and admiration of the people around him.

But that didn't keep him from missing the easy life of a fuck-up every now and then. Being a responsible adult was *hard*.

Steve tossed his ops manual aside with a sigh.

There was a knock at the door.

"Steve, are you there?" It was El.

Frowning, wondering if he'd missed yet another appointment, Steve got up from the desk and opened the door. El waited in the hallway, staring up at him with her big eyes, managing to look both vexed and adorable at the same time. In her pink t-shirt and cut-off shorts, she looked just like the kid sister Steve sometimes called her.

"Everything okay, El?" he asked.

"No."

Steve waited a moment. El stared at him.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

"Yes."

He waited again. El didn't say anything. Conversation was not her strong suit.

"Come on in," he said and El brushed past him and sat on his bed. Steve sat next to her.

"Uh... so, what's the matter, El?"

She turned to face him, looking very serious. "It's about boys."

Oh crap. Steve felt his blood run cold. He liked being El's big brother, her buddy and her confidante, but he sucked at relationship stuff. Giving her advice would be like the blind leading the blind.

"Boys. Right. Like, boys in general, or are you talking something more specific—"

"Mike," she said.

Steve hadn't realized his blood could get even colder.

This was bad. If it involved Wheeler, it meant El might want to talk about... sexual things. That was the last topic you wanted to discuss with your kid sister.

He knew El and Mike started having sex two years ago in Maine. Max

had insisted that the two weren't actually *doing it*, just fooling around a little, but Steve wasn't buying it. El was too naive and innocent to put up much resistance, and Wheeler had this pervy vibe about him that made Steve suspicious.

"Okay, right. What about Mike?" he asked, dreading what El might say next.

"It was last night," El began.

Oh god. It was about sex.

"Mike and I were together," she continued. "Everything was fine at first..."

Please stop there, Steve thought.

"And then Mike started acting... strange."

Oh, this was so bad. Steve could feel himself starting to panic. He didn't want to know what kind of weird kinks lurked in the depths of Wheeler's mind. The perv probably wanted El to do it in the ass.

Steve's eyes widened. Of course. That must be it. Last night, Mike must have tried to get El to be his... backdoor girl. And now El was all freaked out.

Steve should have known. Wheeler had that air about him. All you had to do was look at the guy and you could tell he liked a juicy double.

Not that Steve could really blame him. After all, El's butt was like an act of God. It was truly one of the finest behinds Steve had ever—

He mentally punched himself in the face. *She's your sister she's your sister she's your sister. What's the matter with you? You don't think about your kid sister that way!*

"Uh... strange how?" Steve asked, his voice coming out in a squeaky rasp.

"Well... we were walking under the stars, and talking, and everything was nice. And then Mike said he was tired and he wanted to go to

sleep. And he walked away.”

Walking under the stars. Talking. Thank God. Steve’s heart rate slowed and the prickling needles of panic faded.

“Um, I hear you, El... but Mike *was* tired yesterday. He’d been up for a long time.”

“I know.” El plucked absently at Steve’s blanket. “But when we got back to the Project, he... he didn’t kiss me. He just said goodnight.”

Steve frowned. That didn’t seem like Wheeler. It usually took a crowbar to pry the guy off his girlfriend.

“And this morning,” El continued, “we were in the crypto lab and he barely said a word to me. I was so happy to see him but he acted like I wasn’t even there.”

“That does sound strange,” Steve admitted.

“I just don’t understand boys,” El pouted.

“Well, let’s see,” Steve said, thinking. “Last night – what happened? I mean specifically.”

“I don’t know,” El shrugged. “We were walking and talking and then he left.”

“Yeah, I got that part,” Steve said gently. “What were you talking about?”

“Nothing important. What I’ve been doing, how things were in Hawkins, Ewan, the astronomy I’ve been learning, the—”

“Wait a minute,” Steve interrupted. “You talked about Ewan?”

“Yes,” said El, confused. “Why? Is that important?”

“Maybe. What exactly did you say about Ewan?”

“I... I said he was a lot like Mike. That he was sweet, and funny, and he and Mike had a lot in common. And that I liked Ewan and I hoped

Mike liked him too and they'd be friends."Her brow furrowed."Actually... it was right after that when Mike said he was tired and he walked away."

"Uh-huh.And this morning, in the crypto lab, did you guys talk about Ewan again?"

"No," El said."But it would have been strange to talk about him, because he was there."

"Ewan was there?"

"Yes."

"And... did anything unusual happen while he was there?"

"Other than Mike not talking to me?No."El plucked at the blanket again, pouting, but then she frowned."Wait.When Mike walked in, Ewan was dancing me around the lab and the scientists were humming a song.I guess that was unusual."

There was too much weirdness in that for Steve to process it all, but one part leaped out."You guys were dancing?"

"Yes.Because I was... cold.I mean I told Ewan I was cold.I mean... it's a long story."

"Well, I think I got the main part," said Steve."You were...dancing... with Ewan when Mike walked in."

"Yes.Why?Steve, do you think I did something wrong?"

He sighed."El... no.You didn't do anything wrong.Not intentionally, anyway.It's just that, El... Mike's jealous."

She looked baffled."Mike's jealous?"

"Yes.Of you and Ewan."

Her confusion deepened."Of me and Ewan?"

"El, we're not going to get anywhere if you just keep repeating

everything I say. Yes, trust me – Mike’s jealous of you and Ewan.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. I love Mike! He knows I love him! Why would he be jealous?”

“Anyone can get jealous, El,” said Steve. “I know you love Mike, and you know you love Mike, and I think even Mike knows you love Mike. But people can still feel... fragile, you know? Threatened?”

“But I’m not doing anything! Why would Mike feel threatened?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Come on, El – you’re telling Mike how sweet Ewan is, and how funny he is, then Mike finds you dancing with the guy... he might feel a little worried.”

El shot up from the bed. “But none of that means anything! Ewan is just a friend! Just because I say nice things about him and have a little dance—” she stopped abruptly.

Steve could see comprehension dawn across El’s face.

“Max,” the girl said.

Now that was unexpected. Steve couldn’t imagine what Max had to do with this. “Uh... what?”

“Max,” repeated El. She dropped onto the bed again, looking distraught. “When I was younger, hiding in my father’s cabin in the woods... One day I snuck away and went to the school. I was looking for Mike. I found him... with Max. They were alone in the gym, talking. Max was on her skateboard and she was smiling at him.” El sighed. “I didn’t like it.”

Steve didn’t say anything.

“It was the first time I’d ever seen Mike with a girl our age,” El continued. “And she was pretty. She had such beautiful hair. It was red like fire, not brown and boring like mine. Watching Mike talk to her, watching her smile at him... I got so angry. I was so hurt. For a second I hated them both.”

Steve laid a gentle hand on her back. “I’m sorry, El.”

She turned tearful eyes to him. "That's what I'm doing to Mike now, isn't it Steve?"

"El, look... don't beat yourself up. You didn't realize. And look, it's okay for you to have male friends. Mike will have to come to terms with that. But *maybe* some of the things you were doing *might* have made it a little harder for him to cope."

She sniffed. "But that's the part I don't understand. I've had male friends before. Dustin, Lucas, you. It never bothered Mike."

Steve considered that. "I think it's different this time, El. Dustin and Lucas were Mike's friends as well as yours. He knew he didn't have to worry about them interfering with your relationship. Ewan... Ewan is your first male friend who isn't Mike's friend too."

El sniffed again and rubbed her nose. "I guess."

"It probably doesn't help that Ewan is really good looking. I'm guessing Mike feels a little threatened by that."

El looked confused. "Why? Mike's better looking than Ewan."

Steve studied the girl's face, trying to see if she was joking. No. El was dead serious.

I guess Shakespeare was right, Steve thought. Love is blind.

"Um, right," he said. "Sure. But still... Ewan probably seems like he could be competition. Especially when Mike sees you two..."

"Dancing," El said ruefully.

"Right."

She groaned and lay back on the bed, covering her face with her hands. "Steve, what am I going to do?"

Steve smiled. "El, I could come up with a crazy scheme for you to patch things up with Mike, something that would turn this Project into a bad episode of *Three's Company*. But in this case, I think the simplest approach is the best."

She peeked through her fingers at him. “What do you mean?”

“Just talk to him, El.”

She sat up. “Talk to him?”

“Mike’s a good guy, El. If you talk to him, he’ll listen.”

* * *

**The VLA Observatory
San Agustin Plains, New Mexico
Monday, April 25, 1988**

That night, they walked again under the stars. El kept her arm linked with Mike’s, pulling the boy close to her. She was afraid to let go, certain that if she did he would drift away.

Mike was quiet. Not cold, the way he’d been that morning, but distant. He seemed to be lost in his thoughts. El knew Mike was always thinking, ideas churning and forming and reforming in his busy head. His endless imaginings made him so brilliant – and every now and then they made him so frustratingly *wrong* about things.

Everything’s going to be fine, she told herself. Mike had been wrong about things before, and El had been wrong about things before, and as long as they talked, everything always turned out fine.

“Are you okay, Mike?” she asked at last.

There was a pause before he spoke. “Sure, El. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You were quiet at dinner. And it seemed like... like maybe you didn’t want to go on this walk.”

There was the pause again. “I’ve just got a lot on my mind.”

“Oh.”

And that was the best she could come up with – ‘Oh’.El’s heart sank.This wasn’t going to work.Mike had walled himself off, he wouldn’t talk, and El was too stupid to find the words to bring him out.

She felt like he was slipping away from her with every step.She squeezed his arm tighter, pulling him closer.

“Are you cold, El?” he asked, misreading her desperate grip.

“Um...”She was.The desert got chilly after dark and she was still in her t-shirt and cut-offs.But El didn’t want to say yes and give them a reason to go back inside.Once they were inside, they wouldn’t be alone.They wouldn’t talk and Mike would go to bed and that would be another day without him.

“I’m okay,” she said.

“Take my jacket.”

*Oh Mike.*Even now, when he was distant and hurt, he still thought of her.

“Won’t you be cold?” she asked, reluctantly.

“Nah.Tough guy.”She thought there was almost a smile in his voice.

“Thanks,” she said, and when Mike folded the jacket around her, she closed her eyes.The jacket fell almost to her knees and it was warm and it smelled so wonderfully of him.She let herself pretend for just a moment that everything was all right.She linked her arm in his again.

They walked for a while, under the telescopes, looking at the stars.

“What are you thinking about, Mike?” El said at last.

He shrugged.“Lots of things.”

El didn’t know what to do.She wanted to cry.She was so bad at talking, she’d never figure out what to say to make things right.It was Mike who could speak so well, weaving a tapestry with his language, pulling all the words together until everything was better.

El couldn't do that. She'd never learned how. Being blunt and direct was all she knew.

She clung to Mike's arm, feeling his warmth beside her. She couldn't bear the thought of that warmth going away. She wanted this boy at her side forever.

If blunt and direct was all she had, blunt and direct would have to do.

"Are you thinking about Ewan?" she asked.

Mike stiffened and came to a halt. He started to pull away but El held his arm, kept him with her.

"Why would I be thinking about Ewan?" he said, his voice tight, the coldness seeping back in.

El took a deep breath. "Steve said you were jealous."

"Steve said—"

"I'm sorry, Mike!" El pleaded. "I'm sorry, but you were so cold, and so distant, and it seemed like you didn't want to see me, and it seemed like I'd hurt you or – or I made you angry, and I felt so awful—"

Mike stared at her, shocked by her sudden outpouring of words.

"And you wouldn't talk to me and I felt so alone and I went to Steve and I asked him for help." El realized she was babbling but she couldn't stop. "And Steve said he thought you were jealous of Ewan and I said you couldn't be because I love you and not Ewan and I'd never love Ewan and I'd only ever love you and then I remembered you and Max—"

"Max?" Mike said, confused, but El kept going.

"And I remembered how much that hurt me and I realized I must be doing that to you and I never wanted to do that to you and there was never anything between you and Max anyway and I was so stupid—"

"El—" Mike said.

“And I promise there’s nothing between me and Ewan and there never will be and you’re the only boy I’ve ever loved and you’re the only boy I will ever love—”

“El—” Mike said.

“And I’m so sorry Mike because I’ve been so lonely without you and I miss you so much and I love you and I just want you to love me the way you did before I messed everything up—”

Mike kissed her.

El was so surprised that for a second she froze, eyes wide as Mike’s lips pressed against hers.

Then it crashed over her that this was Mike, her Mike, and he was kissing her, and there was so much love in his kiss that tears started from her eyes. El knotted her fingers in his hair, and she closed her eyes, and she lost herself in him.

Mike kissed her for a long time and El felt her crazy babbling panic go away.

Mike kept kissing her, and his strong lean arms wrapped around her, and then there was nothing in the world but El and the boy she loved and the sky and the stars.